

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

THE WORKS OF ANATOLE
FRANCE IN ENGLISH

Edited by the late FREDERIC CHAPMAN
and J. LEWIS MAY.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH
ANATOLE FRANCE

By NICOLAS SÉGUR. Translated by
J. LEWIS MAY.

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THE BODLEY HEAD

THE OPINIONS OF ANATOLE FRANCE

By NICOLAS SÉGUR



AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
By J. LEWIS MAY



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INTRODUCTION



It has been said of some brilliant writers, that their conversation was disappointingly barren and undistinguished. Certain authors, we are told, whose works are scintillating with epigram, show themselves, when they come to mix with ordinary humanity, "dull and muddy-mettled rascals," capable of delivering themselves only of such banalities and platitudes as would be suited to the intellectual atmosphere of a suburban tea-party. It is hinted, in their defence, that these great folk keep their best ideas for their books and, there being nothing left over, their friends have, perforce, to batten on these pitiably short commons.

It may be that there have been, and still

are, such people in the world ; but if so, Anatole France cannot be classed with that parsimonious fraternity. He was a great talker, as well as a great writer ; and though, if all the stories about him are true, it needed much effort and much discipline on the part of himself and his friends to keep him to his writing-desk, it was far otherwise in the matter of talking. To talk he was always willing, and more than willing. His conversation was easy, friendly, unconstrained, with a pleasant after-dinner flavour about it. He was certainly not one of those who address you, as Mr. Gladstone addressed Queen Victoria, “like a public meeting,” and who seem to be rehearsing their ideas and their phrases upon you—a sort of *experimentum in corpore vili*, or “trying it on the dog.” Such people make you feel instinctively that you will have to go through the whole thing again, later on, *in print* ! So far was Anatole France from any conscious desire to dazzle or impress his audience, that he was often embarrassingly oblivious of their

existence. He did not greatly care whom he talked to, provided they were intelligent, and good listeners, and sparing of interruption. Some of his best things were spoken to his dog.

To give an idea of the individual flavour, the peculiar charm of a man's conversation, it is not enough to furnish a sort of annotated inventory of his ideas. Something more than that is needed, and that "something more" is supremely difficult to supply, as difficult as catching a butterfly without rubbing the bloom off its wings.

I have read a good many *soi-disant* conversations with Anatole France, and in all instances save two, I have said to myself, "The ideas may be the ideas of France, but the voice is the voice of another." The exceptions to which I allude are this present book of Monsieur Nicolas Ségur's and its predecessor. By I know not what process of enchantment, Monsieur Ségur has, for the time being, made himself Anatole France. With the aid of some magic other than the Odyssean, he has

summoned the beloved figure from the shades, and Anatole France himself seems to live for us again in the pages which follow. We hear, once more, the rich, deliberate music of his voice ; we see his familiar smile ; we are warmed by the glow of his presence.

There are only two criticisms, two very mild criticisms, that I venture to offer concerning Monsieur Ségur's book. One is that the author of *Naïs au Miroir* makes himself play altogether too modest a part in these conversations. The other is that, to me at least, he seems to lay a little too much stress on Anatole France's pessimism ; not, indeed, on the pessimism of his intellectual outlook—for that is undeniable—but on the pessimism of his conversation. But there ! Monsieur Ségur saw more of him than I did ; and perhaps—so much, indeed, is hinted in this book—Anatole France reserved his pessimism for the stronger-minded and more intelligent of his friends.

J. LEWIS MAY.

PREFACE



IN my previous volume, *Conversations with Anatole France*, I made it clear to my readers that I was then giving to the world only an instalment of my recollections, namely, those which were more particularly associated with the personality of my author. Running through the notes I had taken of the conversations we had had together, I made a hurried selection of those which I considered best calculated to illustrate his character as a man.

Although I have already given not a few instances of the pessimism which so often betrayed itself in Anatole France's conversation, I was far from having exhausted my stock of examples of the pitiless searchlight he was

went to turn on to the social and intellectual conditions of the world around him.

From his youth upwards, he had ever been a severe critic of his own times, and this severity increased as he grew older. Save when the presence of narrow-minded or fanatical people compelled him to speak in conventional language and to display an assumed optimism, he gave unreserved expression to the melancholy scepticism that filled his heart.

And if there was something of the Jeremiah about this old man who, in the evening of his days, believed he saw the whole world tumbling in ruin about him and meditated with a sad irony on the vanity of all things, his views, taken as a whole, were well founded ; his insight, penetrating the merely superficial aspect of things, extended far beyond the present ; his forebodings for the future compelled the attention of his listeners and seriously disturbed their complacency.

It is the essential features of his diagnosis of

the maladies that assail our times which I have here attempted to convey. Notwithstanding a few exaggerations, a few prejudices, which now and then obtrude themselves, the ideas to which Anatole France gave utterance, whether on matters of ephemeral import or on the great problems that eternally confront the mind of man, seem to me well worthy of consideration. This it is that has encouraged me to give them to the world ; this also it is that has led me to indulge the pleasure, which I could not readily resist, of calling to mind a variety of other sayings of his, though in making up my sheaf I have discarded the merely anecdotal in favour of questions more permanent and more general in their bearing.

The conversation of Anatole France furnished an inexhaustible mine of interest to such as had a gift for listening and for remembering what they heard ; and what a wealth of recollections one is forced, merely for lack of space, temporarily at least, to lay aside !

One might, for example, set down the

various judgments which he was in the habit of pronouncing on the living and on the dead. On his contemporaries he was especially severe : the views he expressed about them were as ironical as they were forcible and incisive. But it would be unbecoming to repeat these personal *obiter dicta*, or at least to commit them to paper. It would hardly redound to our credit to use the bones of one who is dead, and thus incapable of protest or approval, to belabour those who are still of this world.

And then there are a host of anecdotes that come into my mind—little episodes mainly drawn from “ the passèd world.” It was more particularly during the summer of 1899 that I was made the repository of these vignettes. One month of that year I spent in closest intimacy with France, lunching and dining almost every day at Madame de Caillavet’s in the Avenue Hoche. And on every occasion, on the instigation of our hostess, who was always anxious to contribute to my enter-

tainment, France would narrate one of the countless tales and anecdotes with which his memory was stored and which fell as copiously from his lips as they did from his pen. Some of them I noted down from time to time, but to attempt to give them to the world would be to rob them of at least a part of their brilliance and to brush away that impalpable bloom which, like the dust on a butterfly's wing, clothed them with the hues of the rainbow and invested them with a sort of magic grace. France used to recount these little tales of his with all manner of variations, but he always left upon them the indelible impress of beauty or illumined them with the sudden light of some unexpected or revealing comparison ; moreover, the charm with which it was told would often make amends for the comparative triviality of the story itself. And then again I can recall countless pronouncements of his on human passions, on people of bygone days, on historical personages and events.

He was indeed an inexhaustible well-spring

of ideas, and wonderfully gifted as he was with his pen, his conversational resources were no less remarkable. Moreover, he was steeped in knowledge—knowledge which he could assimilate, make his own, and cause to bring forth fruit, not only by illuminating it with the ever-shifting gleams of his lambent intelligence, but also by setting it in some novel and unfamiliar aspect—a faculty which he owed to his powers of philosophic generalization and to that remarkable gift for estimating the significance of tendencies and groups of tendencies, which was one of the fundamental characteristics of his genius.

I can see him, see him with a distinctness which does but grow ever more vivid now that he has been taken from our midst. All the old familiar gestures come back to me. He haunts me like a beneficent spirit ; and from the hidden places of my memory there continually rises up some notable saying of his, one of those unforgettable apophthegms which were, so to speak, the honeyed essence of all the

knowledge he had amassed while studying his fellow-men, looking out over the world of Nature, meditating on the mystery of Fate, and pondering on the everlasting mirage of Beauty and Desire.

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**ANATOLE FRANCE
AND THE WAR**

ANATOLE FRANCE AND THE WAR

I

TROUBLOUS TIMES



DID not come into contact with Anatole France during the early years of the war. When, at length, I saw him again, at Saint Cloud and, subsequently, at La Béchellerie, he was wearing a broad, untrimmed beard and, physically, seemed much changed. But it was the moral change in him that struck me most forcibly. Silent and constrained in manner, cautious, almost timid, in his utterances, professing an optimism he clearly did not feel, such was the impression he left upon my mind.

He had never hitherto concealed what was in his mind. Unless out of compassion for his

listeners, he seldom troubled to disguise his feelings. Yet now it was obvious that he was—much against the grain—merely talking as the rest of the world was talking. This assumed attitude, which he but ill dissembled, had, as might be expected, a somewhat puzzling effect upon his listeners. •

Moreover, his conversation had lost its readiness, its fire. One waited in vain—or almost in vain—for those dexterous variations and improvisations, those original turns of phrase, and swift, unexpected paradoxes on men and things which, like the chorus of birds in the spring, seemed to well forth from some rich and irrepressible fountain of inspiration.

Confined, and as it were “shadowed,” within the bounds of his estate at La Béchel-lerie, where he had been compelled by loneliness and also by the fear of making himself a marked man, to keep open house and to welcome every kind of intruder, he had to endure every Sunday—and, indeed, on other days of the week as well—the presence of a strange

assortment of visitors, sightseers, idlers who wanted to fill up an hour or two of their time, obscure and ignorant provincials, as well as Americans and English people who were passing through the neighbourhood. He seemed, in consequence, like one who had lost his bearings. His conversation lacked the flowers that had once adorned it ; his mind seemed temporarily to have been laid waste.

“ I’m like the Villa Saïd,” he said to me one day with a smile ; “ I’m laid low.”

What struck me most, however, was that, fearing lest his words should be misinterpreted, or even commented upon at all, he expressed himself only in colourless and conventional language. But even so, the pompous pronouncements of official optimism could not pass his lips without taking on a flavour of subtle irony, or being so weighted with exaggeration that they fell upon the ear like bombshells.

He would repeat aloud, with a sort of perverse delight, all the threadbare phrases

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with which the newspapers, day by day, endeavoured to put heart into the people. He would quote the words of one of his colleagues in the Academy, reiterating the familiar exhortation "to go on to the bitter end, till the enemy was crushed out of existence"; and with a confidence as admirable as it was unwavering, he made ironic profession of his entire belief in the ability of every allied general in the field.

Then, suddenly, he would forget that he was playing a part, and his spontaneity, his sincerity and, above all, the zest he took in criticizing ideas and commenting on events, would resume their sway.

It was enough that one of the company should express his alarm, or hazard a pessimistic view, for France to dart him a glance of interested approval, compelling him to enlarge on the reasons on which his forebodings were based, helping him to give full expression to what was in his mind.

Mortification on the one hand and

apprehension on the other were, I think, the two main contributory causes of the reticence no less than of that disagreeable, recalcitrant attitude which France adopted during the war.

There were also certain personal incidents which caused him annoyance. Conscious of his own intellectual⁹ superiority, but finding that, notwithstanding his patriotism, he was misunderstood and unfairly criticized, he adopted, by way of defensive armour, a kind of cynical persiflage.

One day, *a propos* of an article which some one present had written concerning Renan's patriotism, he made allusion to his own attitude at the beginning of the war.

"One would never have imagined it would become necessary to defend Renan's patriotism," he observed. "Yet, great man as he was, he came at last to be the victim of a veritable persecution. After all kinds of attacks had been levelled against him in the newspapers, their readers began seriously to question on which side Renan really stood. There was an

attempt to spread a report that he had shown the white feather, that he had been given to wine-bibbing and to wreathing his brows with flowers, like Anacreon, while the war of 1870 was at its height.

“ And in point of fact Renan was a true patriot, but his patriotism was not of a brand calculated to please the common herd. It was a brand that held itself within bounds and estimated the enemy at his true value. He did not shout, he did not give way to frenzy. That was his unpardonable offence.”

Then, having shaken hands with an English journalist, who had just put in an appearance, France went on again :

“ Renan’s times were different from ours. It was then still permissible to write and to think, and to love one’s country in one’s own way. The Empire was still in existence, it is true, but for all that, we enjoyed comparative freedom.

“ Most important of all there still existed a certain intellectual level which the Press had

not as yet wholly undermined, and the days of the giants had not completely passed away. In short, for want of a more illustrious example, we may take my own personal adventure as marking the difference that sunders the two periods. I believed myself to be speaking with dignity and in accordance with the highest traditions of France when, at the beginning of the war, I drew a distinction between the German people, and the criminals who led them, and said that, when we had conquered the former, we should treat them as France had always treated her foes, and as she would always continue to treat them, so long as she was France—that is to say, the land of greatness and magnanimity.

“However, this utterance, which was, after all, a good deal less indulgent than anything Renan had said in 1870, was received with such howls of execration, and stirred up such a storm of calumny, that I felt it was no time to be philosophizing and arguing, but rather to be acting in accordance with the dictates of

popular reasoning in its most rudimentary form. For, after all, I think I love my country at least as dearly as the idiots that go about shouting their sentiments from the housetops. I am even capable of loving her blindly, like them. That's why I thought I would volunteer for service. Reason and judgment were at a discount in Europe. Brawn was what was wanted. I offered mine ! ”

“ It seems,” he said one day, “ that they send people here to spy on me. I get letters, too, which, though they don't trouble me, rather scare the people about me.”

“ Have you observed,” he continued with a smile, “ that derelictions and misdeeds are often the result of suggestion ? A witch tells Macbeth that he will murder Duncan and become King. Macbeth who, up till then, has never harboured such an idea in his head and has never dreamt of shedding blood, gradually grows used to the notion, murders Duncan and becomes King. And now that I know that I am being watched, and that I am looked on as

an enemy to the Government, I have a greater itch than ever to give my tongue free play.

“All the same, one must be careful. Stupidity is mighty, particularly when it is multiplied. In ordinary times it has a hundred heads ; but in war time it has a thousand, and every one of them bites. You must go with the stream when you are in a fire or a flood. I do my best to look at things as the majority see them.

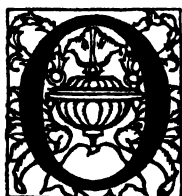
“You remember the well-known story about Leibnitz. He had booked his passage on a little vessel in order to cross the Adriatic. During the voyage, a storm sprang up and the craft was in grave peril. The other passengers, being creatures of a superstitious turn of mind, began to observe Leibnitz with considerable attention ; for, as you will readily imagine, the originator of the Differential Calculus did not look very much like the general run of people, which was a piece of grave imprudence on his part, especially at a time of crisis. This was soon made unpleasantly manifest to him. The

pilot, jabbering Italian, had already begun to inform the others that that silent man over there, all clad in black, was undoubtedly a heretic, that it was at his instigation that the elements had put themselves into such a fury, and that it was their obvious duty to throw him overboard if they wished to avert the evil spell and escape with their lives. Leibnitz, being an accomplished linguist, heard and understood, and saw that he must behave like the rest if he was to save his skin. With characteristic presence of mind he pretended to be quite unconscious of the peril that threatened him, and producing a rosary, which by a lucky chance he happened to have in the pocket of his *surtout*, began to tell his beads with every appearance of religious fervour, muttering algebraic formulæ instead of prayers. This piece of acting saved him his life.

“When folly reigns, it is well to act the fool if you want to avoid remark.”

II

NEWS FROM THE FRONT



ONE day in 1918, I happened to be at La Béchellerie with my daughter. We had just had lunch with France and Madame, and had retired to the drawing-room.

Suddenly a young man, whom I had never seen before, but who probably lived at Tours, burst excitedly into the room.

Our hostess turned anxiously towards him.
“Any news from the Front?” she inquired eagerly.

“I couldn’t get hold of a paper,” said the young man, “but they’re sending them along presently. I wish they’d hurry up; I’m feeling terribly anxious about things.”

“Why are you anxious, my friend?” said France, very calmly.

“Why, I happened to catch a glimpse of some one else’s paper—the headlines, I mean—

and I saw something in big letters about a German attack."

"Don't worry," answered France ; " that attack has been repulsed."

"How do you know, Monsieur ?" inquired the lady.

"Why, our friend here has told me so this very moment !"

"I ?" protested the astonished young man.

"Come ; the thing's as simple as daylight ! You say you are short-sighted, yet you were able to read this piece of news. Therefore it must have been printed in big type. Now, they never announce an attack in big type unless it has been driven back or is in course of being driven back. If it had been successful, they would never have given it such prominence.

"Here, we have been at war for four years," he went on, raising his hands to heaven, "and you don't know, even now, how to read a *communiqué* ? Well, I must say I've met some fools and some clever people in my day ;

people with their eyes open and people with their eyes shut ; pessimistic people and optimistic people ; but ever since August 1914, I haven't met a single soul who has retained the faculty of understanding what he reads."

And turning towards me and a young American soldier, who, having conquered La Béchellerie, came whenever he liked, laughed at everything and understood nothing, France continued as follows :

" These four years of fighting have made me see more clearly than ever before in my long life how vacillating a thing is man's intelligence. For millions of years, man was at the mercy of his instincts, groping confusedly among the phantoms of Fear and Desire. The memory of those preceding æons will never be effaced from his mind. The savage, we are told, is imbued with mysticism and superstition. But when anything occurs to shake his sense of security, your civilized man forthwith puts on the garments of mysticism and superstition. That fragile flower, the

human intelligence, the flower which we have so recently acquired, sways and bends helplessly when it is caught in the tempest of some great emotion. When that happens, logic goes by the board ; we have no ears save for our hatreds and our hopes and such subsidiary ideas as are in tune with the diapason of those hatreds and hopes.

“ Europe, when the war broke out, reverted to the mentality of the savage. It involved altogether too great a risk to go on playing at understanding things. So we abandoned reason. A few adjectives expressing encouragement and satisfaction, accompanying and veiling some disastrous retreat, suffice to soothe the emotions and sustain the hopes of the newspaper readers, who never see beyond the glistening foil of things. And so ‘ Situation on the whole satisfactory ’ is the phrase that makes any sort of merchandise acceptable.

“ However, these things have to be. A man who, like me, continues to reason things

out while all around him is confusion and disaster, is a dangerous, an impious monster. Or rather, I am like the Jewish prophet who went on prophesying amid the hurly-burly. I, like him, deserve to be stoned for my pains."

The American exclaimed in bad French what a pity it would be that Monsieur France should be stoned, because he was so nice.

"At any rate," France continued, "that is what made me a suspect! To use your intelligence, to try to reason instead of shutting your ears to everything save the hallowed voices of blind, unreasoning passion has, in truth, a suspicious look about it. By refusing to follow the lead of the Spirit of Folly that is now paramount in Europe, you prejudice the *Union Sacrée*, the common brutalization which, with us as with our enemies, is a mighty powerful weapon."

"They are pretty clever, the people who write these *communiqués*," said Madame.

"They are not generals, that is quite clear," said France. "A cinema caption-writer

or a purveyor of popular novelettes would be the sort of person to dish up war news, skilfully mingling the tears of joy and the thrills of horror. Anyhow, it's not the generals who are responsible for our *communiqués*. I am not speaking ironically. It is not right that a general should be eloquent and gifted with powers of persuasion. That would soften him and detract from his heroic qualities."

"It's hard work being a general," said the American, "hard, but pleasant."

"Pleasant? You think so?" said France. "Men haunted by the fear of the Unknown which encompasses them, responsible for all manner of things they know nothing about. Why, the thing must be appalling, because they are completely in the dark! I used to like to tell the story how, on one occasion, a certain general, during the Grand Manœuvres, went rushing about the whole of one night trying to find his brigade. It had been reported at a score of different places. He alone was unable to locate it. Every one else

had seen it somewhere or other. That is war in a nutshell. A general never knows what is taking place and the results of battles surprise him as much as they do us. Firing by mistake on friends instead of foes, starting at one's own shadow, little things incalculable and unforeseen continually happening around one ; such are the daily experiences of your strategist. For the rest, 'tis a childish art which borrows its essentials from the crafts and pastimes of everyday peaceful existence. You have first to engage the enemy, and then you have to outflank him if you can. You have to cross rivers by means of bridges and then destroy the bridges ; you must cross mountains at their foot and be mistrustful of defiles. When you can no longer maintain yourself in the open because of the rain of shells, you have to seek shelter, as you would from any other kind of rain. And you must be particularly observant of what is going on behind you.

“ In reality, it is chance that moulds your

wars, and battles do not begin till after they are over, when they are set forth on the map. They are, strictly speaking, geometrical diagrams."

At this point the American soldier rose, made his bow and departed ; but not until he had asked my daughter and myself to give him a recipe for making caramels, of which the abundance of sugar he had at his command made it easy for him to avail himself.

"They are light-hearted fellows, these Americans," said France. "They laugh while they listen, shut their eyes while they talk and appear to be deep in concentration. As a general rule, they are guileless enough. Whether they are laughing, or whether they are in travail with some idea, it is all the same ; there is nothing in common between them and us."

Then, addressing himself more particularly to me, he went on :


"To speak the truth, they have not as yet beheld the satyr that revealed to the Greeks

the tragedy of life. But they are stubborn. They have come to save us and they have signed on for a long period. Yes, they are stubborn fellows ! Besides, they've brought so many pots of jam with them that they are bound to win, or die of indigestion. I am told that they are getting married freely at Tours. Every one of them when he goes home will take with him a shell-case and a wife by way of souvenirs. 'Tis a mingling of stock, the nuptials of Alexander, the alliance of two different worlds.

“ And they will come again, now that they know the way.”

III

THE ILLUSION OF PEACE

“  E put Peace, the era of Peace, in the Future. The Future is a very convenient place to store Utopias. No one can go and see what is there.

“ Thus peace is like the credit system

which facetious traders advertise for to-morrow, insisting on cash down to-day."

It was towards the end of the war, and there was a crowd of people at La Béchellerie, some of them the ordinary habitués, but most of them Americans who hung on France's words with the rapt and gloomy attention of people who listen and cannot understand a word.

Despite his native pessimism, France was in an excellent frame of mind that day, and his discourse flowed freely and abundantly.

"So you are no believer in peace, *cher maître*, though you have so often hailed it in your speeches?" said one of the company.

"Yes," he replied, "I long for it, but without much hope; just as I wish a good day to the people I meet of a morning, knowing well enough that the day cannot be good, seeing that it brings with it so many unforeseen vexations, and that, in any case, it inevitably conducts us a step nearer to Old Age and Death.

"In reality, when we proclaim the virtues

of Peace, as when we sing the praises of Fraternity, Justice and Freedom, we are but indulging in a polite fiction—a fiction we adopt in order to conceal, as far as possible, a truth of which we are all aware, but concerning which we have all agreed to remain silent—namely, that we human beings are mischievous apes, lineal descendants of the Simian species, actuated by selfishness and violence, living in a society compounded of lies and hypocrisies modelled on the character of the unattractive animal that first shaped it.”

“ You entertain a sorry opinion of your fellow-man, Monsieur France,” said the beautiful Madame S., whose husband was a close friend of the host of La Béchellerie.

“ Yes, I have a sorry opinion of men ; and well it were that we should all share that view ; otherwise woe to the human race ! People would expect too much of it. Have you not remarked that the most conspicuous acts of cruelty, the most terrible massacres, are inspired by the idea that man is fundamentally

good and virtuous? The little speech-making lawyers and tenth-rate doctors, who were responsible for the outrages of the Revolution and plunged France into seas of blood, were merely actuated by the desire to bring back the Golden Age and restore the primeval simplicity of man. They were lacking in the kindness, in the easy tolerance which come of the recognition of human frailty. These redoubtable visionaries intended to bring about the reign of truth upon the earth, and to mete out justice in equal measure to all. They were for exterminating people wholesale, in order that the few who were left should live in a sort of Promised Land. It is quite otherwise with me; if I take a sorry view of man, it is because I love him and feel compassion for him.

“Can it be said that he is peacefully inclined, since it seems evident that man—to judge by his appetites—is closely akin to the animals; and that, over and above all that, there is something in him for which he is

always sacrificing his tranquillity and which urges him irresistibly towards war ? ”

Here, for some reason or another, he fixed his eyes on an American officer who was present, and continued :

“ The reign of Peace. Why, there is everything against it : the Past, Tradition, Society, Religion ! Our God is the God of Hosts, the supreme War Lord. Our flag is the most susceptible thing in existence. We will not suffer anyone to look askance at it, and we call it ‘ The National Honour.’ No one in Europe knows quite what that means ; but all the same it is a fetish to be reckoned with. One can offend it, like certain tribal divinities, without in the least knowing how. Time was when, if a prince received, or thought he had received, an affront, he sent a hundred thousand unfortunate creatures to wash out the insult with their blood. They had speeches made to them and were told that theirs was a glorious destiny. Later on, they were made to march at the lash of the whip.

“ During the Revolution, the leaders shot half their men to encourage the remainder. Nowadays, though princes are fewer, things are the same as they ever were. People seldom know what they are fighting about, except, perhaps, in civil wars which, in that respect at least, seem to me by far the most sensible.”

“ We know what we are fighting for to-day,” answered the American officer, who had some difficulty in expressing himself. “ We are fighting for Justice.”

“ Yes, exactly, we all know that,” replied France. “ But I am not speaking about this war. I am speaking of War, yesterday’s war, to-morrow’s war. Here in Europe, ever since Plato’s day, we have got into the habit of arguing from the particular to the general. You must take us as you find us, with all our generalizing proclivities thick upon us.”

And after smiling at the American, as if to crave his indulgence, he became silent for a moment, and then went on again :

“ Peace ! How can one hope to bring

about Peace, since it is in man's nature to issue from his mother's womb armed with spear and helmet, like Minerva? He comes into the world to seize something that belongs to another. We see that in ourselves; we see it also in the animals, from the bull to the ant, which latter is a great deal more bellicose than the Prussians. Just now we were thundering anathema at war; but we are getting used to it. In a certain sense, your European finds it to his taste. It comes naturally and familiarly to him. And that is why it would not be easy for him to put an end to it.

• “Nevertheless, it must not be said that when, in some remote future, the United States of Europe have come into being, wars will automatically cease.

“Fighting will go on within the union, and instead of many, we shall experience only one ‘fierce confederate storm.’ Clearly that will be an advantage.”

And then, a little impatient at the interruption, he went on :

“ No, Victor Cousin, and after him, Renan and Darwin, were, perhaps, not far wrong. War is part and parcel of man’s nature, or rather it is an immediate consequence of life. Old Heraclitus said as much long ere their day. If we, the Allies, have issued manifestoes denouncing the principle of war, it is because, up to now, things have not been turning out wholly to our advantage. Yes, I am afraid war is a necessity. I recall a profound saying of Machiavelli to the effect that a country stagnates in time of peace. That’s worth pondering. War is a system of collective gymnastics, the necessary national pastime, just as boxing, swimming and physical culture are necessary individual pastimes. Perhaps the era of Peace, when it comes, will dull the mind and corrode those springs of emulation and ambition which bear witness to a healthy and resilient vitality.”

But suddenly he interrupted his reverie.

“ No matter ; our dignity, as men, requires that we should make war on war. I have often

wondered how it is that religion is at enmity with love, since it knows that love is inevitable, inherent in nature, necessary for the perpetuation of the species on earth, essential, in a greater degree, than anything else is essential. Well, in the first place, the Church has to create sinners, as being necessary for the proper functioning of the cult. But another explanation is that it is good for the members of the human race to believe that they can

. . . rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

Let us—since unhappily we must—regard the abolition of war as improbable, but let us, nevertheless, foretell, proclaim and demand the advent of peace. Peace will always be coming *to-morrow*. No matter. We should be conscious of a great humiliation, a great deprivation, if we were forced to make up our minds that Peace would never come. But once more—we must never, alas, forget it—the watchword of the universe is ‘Kill one another.’ God, our God, is not only the God

of Armies, He is, above all—is and always will be—the God of Extermination. He is made in our own image.”

Then, with a gently humorous smile, he came up to me and said, as if in confidence :

“ You look on me as a pessimist. No, but I cannot deceive myself even to indulge my most cherished hopes.”

IV

THE BENEFITS OF WAR



HERE was another occasion on which I heard him praise the military virtues, and that was at Saint Cloud, during the war. It was one Sunday, and a reception was being held in the sheltering house where Anatole France and the invalid lady, who was so dear to him and to whom he ministered with such paternal affection, were so hospitably entertained.

His friend, M. de Porto Riche, had come

to see him. Then there arrived a *grande dame* of Saxon origin, and a crowd of other folk.

At length the visitors were beginning to take their departure.

We had talked about books, and were now discussing the war—a subject which obsessed France, as it obsessed every one else, and which provokes such a number of different ideas. After uttering his customary lament over the evils of the times, Anatole France recalled an experience of his own.

“ I, too,” he said, “ was a soldier in my day, and proud enough I was of it, too. My captain, whose name was Chalamel, an excellent fellow, was very fond of me, and people used to say that in my braided *képi* I looked every inch a soldier. It must be confessed that soldiering was not such a tough job then as it is to-day. My friend C. (who was turning out some admirable pictures at that time) and I did our best to defend Paris against the Germans. But, most important of all, we read our Virgils. Yes, it was in the year '70

that I read Virgil. C. was grinding up a Latin thesis, and that, in turn, prompted me to renew my acquaintance with the Romans. I remember that, all through the terrific uproar of the December bombardment, we were reading the *Eclogues*. The Prussians were like so many white ants on the hills round about, and the post we were told off to guard was an exposed one. But we cared little for danger, being too deeply enthralled by the beauty of the poetry."

Then, taking up another idea, he said :

" You acquire a taste for bloodshed when you put yourself to it, when you're in the thick of it. I remember experiencing the same sort of feeling at bull-fights—for I've not only been a soldier, I've been at bull-fights too.

" Well, at first, the thing seemed intolerable : horses with their bellies ripped open, wounded beasts dripping with gore, men in peril of their lives. Then, by degrees, the feelings of apprehension, of horror died down and a sensation of eager curiosity took their

place. Painful to begin with, the sight of blood at length left me indifferent, and before long I came to look for, nay to long for, some accident to happen. I saw the animals fall and men nearly killed with the same sort of detached curiosity with which one contemplates the battles and scenes of carnage in the pictures of Salvator Rosa and Meissonier. I became bloodthirsty by nature, and so much so that, at length, I had to keep away from the ring. Well, I have often noted this same state of mind in men who have come back from the Front. The most horrible thing about war is that the blood-lust grows upon you."

Once more he paused to shake hands with a departing guest. We were now almost alone. And, irresistibly, as though in a spirit of self-contradiction, Anatole France began to emphasize certain favourable aspects of war, of the very scourge he had been denouncing a few moments before.

"Of course," he said, "war is a frightful thing, a frightful thing ! But we must beware

of giving too ready an assent to the obvious. It is easy to speak ill of war ; easy and, at the same time, superfluous. But we do it, I do it, incessantly. In reality war is only horrible because of the sorrow it causes. However, if it is altogether hateful when it bathes a whole planet in blood, and for reasons which have unloosed the present scourge, we must not generalize about it too glibly. War is barbarous and fraught with pain. But we must not forget that it was once the essential factor—nay the only factor—in the growth of civilization. I amaze you? But think a moment. It was by means of war that the primitive peoples founded their cities, that the Greeks triumphed over the forces of barbarism, that Christianity won its way among the uncouth races who attacked the Roman Empire, and that Liberty, or at least a semblance of Liberty, was established in the world by Napoleon. And it was by means of war, athwart a trail of blood, that Alexander effected the fruitful union of two separate continents.

“Then again, despite the atrocities by which it is accompanied, war is human. It is human because it derives from man, and has existed as long as man has existed. But, above all, it is human because it is the only means devised by man for imposing some sort of orderly control on his ineluctable and brutish need of combat and carnage, and for directing his instincts towards an ideal of justice.”

When I objected that it was force and not justice which inspires and decides these battles, he said :

“Calm yourself, my friend. Maybe war will some day be abolished. That happy day, that welcome day, I long for with all my heart. But it is to be feared that, when that day does come, we shall abolish not only war, but the virtues which war produced, and the energy which it nourished. Universal peace will only be established at the price of what we call the warlike virtues ; those rare virtues which act as a stimulus to the health of the body-politic and the individuals composing it. The spirit

of command, the spirit of obedience, courage and self-denial are the essential pivots both of the state and the individual, and they will have vanished, or all but vanished, with the disappearance of war."

And as we passed out into the garden which leads to the outer gates, he went on :

"Time was when people believed that every good thing man received came to him at the point of a spear, and that the soldier was the great pioneer of civilization. That was not wholly untrue. That, indeed, is one aspect of war, and it must not be lost sight of altogether. But clearly, it has other aspects, sombre, cruel aspects. They are the ones which are forced upon us to-day, as we survey this far-flung line of hideous and unprecedented slaughter. Let us not forget, either, that war has changed its countenance. There was a time when there was something noble about war, something gracious, as of a magnanimous and chivalrous pastime. It brought out all man's individual richness of character, all

his animal grace. Few lives were lost, and its ravages were negligible compared with those caused by an outbreak of plague or cholera. Now, civilization and the progress of science have turned it into a sort of wholesale massacre where individual skill and individual bravery count for nothing ; a massacre of blind earth-worms, who engage in mutual slaughter without ever seeing their adversary. The first flower of old-time warfare—personal heroism—has been laid low. No, it is a hideous, hideous thing. If only it would end ! If only we could shake off this nightmare ! ”

THREE TALKS ON SOCIALISM

THREE TALKS ON SOCIALISM

I

THE END OF THE WORLD



HE pessimism of Anatole France, deepened by the growing years, led him to view the future with grave misgiving. Unconsciously he associated, I think, the end of his own life, which he felt to be approaching, with the downfall of Europe. Without as well as within, all seemed dark and foreboding.

Some time before the war even, I remember hearing him give expression to some very melancholy ideas concerning the present and the future, speaking, contrary to his wont, with astonishing vehemence.

I had not seen him for a long time when, on the day in question, I happened to run

across him at a curio-dealer's in the Boulevard Saint-Germain ; and, by the light of the setting sun, I walked with him across the Place de la Concorde and along the Champs Elysées as far as the Etoile, where he left me and took a taxi.

France began by telling me about the alterations he was having carried out at the Villa Saïd.

“ Everything is upside down,” he said, “ and you wouldn't know the place.”

I understood that these changes, necessitated by the collection of Prudhons, which he had just acquired and about which, at that time, he was particularly enthusiastic, went rather against the grain. For he had little love of change. He clung to the familiar everyday aspect of his home in the Villa Saïd, where he had passed so many years ; not, indeed, years of complete happiness, for such do not occur in the lives of men, but years lived with zest ; days full of diversity, full of eagerness and anticipation, of the mirage of knowledge,

of the illusory hope of discovering some fragmentary odds and ends of truth.

“ Well,” he said, “ I’ve got the workmen in, and it’s a great bore ! ”

“ Rearranging one’s things or changing houses is always a terrific undertaking,” I answered, wishing to appear sympathetic.

“ Oh, come now, don’t plunge me into the very depths, my friend ! ” said France. “ I wanted to carry out some minor alterations in my house so as to make it harmonize with the change in myself ; it is my own doing and I must put up with the consequences. Let us hope it will soon be finished, and that, when it’s all done, more or less endurable things will happen to me there. Have you ever reflected how the unknown, with all its bewildering secrets, is lying in wait for you in the house where you are going to take up your abode ? What things will befall you within those four walls ? Will smiles shine down upon you there, or will tears of sorrow be your portion ? I remember how, as I was

reading a book of Tournier's, the idea of the Nemesis of the ancient Greeks dawned upon me for the first time. I was living at the time in the Rue Chalgrin. It is the house we dwell in that holds the secret of our destiny ; and in one way there is nothing more true, nothing better founded, than the old superstition about haunted houses. Haunted, indeed, they are, with the spirits of bliss or teen, of happiness or misfortune, ready to mete us out joy or sorrow, to visit us with death, dishonour, treachery and disappointment, or, maybe, with love, gaiety, good health, the ecstasy of literary creation, the joys that are born of intellectual pursuits."

Then, *à propos* of the Villa Saïd, France went on to talk about the state of Europe, and said it was plain enough to the trained eye that it was cracking in all directions, and that the whole fabric would have to be built up anew. And prophesying the advent of prosperous, and at the same time more equitable, social conditions, he inquired what I thought about the matter.

“ I hope,” I replied, “ if such a thing be possible, that it may not be necessary for justice to come by way of injustice, and that the city of the future, the dwelling-place of peace and happiness, may not be sealed with blood.”

“ That, too, is my hope,” he said. “ But, perhaps,” he added ironically, “ we are but dreamers. We are asking that men should come to a peaceful understanding with each other, suddenly, and, as it were, by a sort of miracle ; and that one fine day, without any preliminaries, without any preparation, they should inaugurate the reign of universal equality and justice. But if they could, by peaceful means, come to such an agreement, they would be men no longer, but angels. You remind me of a certain guileless Russian revolutionary, who used to prophesy that the day would come when the palatial residences in the Champs Elysées would of necessity have to be handed over to the poor, since as a result of the reign of equality, their present owners

would have no servants to work them. And so, abandoning these vast inconvenient mansions they would go and live modestly in the sort of little villas you see at Auteuil ; while we humbler folk would, though with no great eagerness, take over the great houses in the Champs Elysées."

After that, he walked on some paces in silence. Then, in a tone of complete and—for him—unusual seriousness, he resumed :

" People do not see that the whole fabric of society is crumbling to pieces. Society, every society, must have an ideal to live by. But now the fount of idealism seems to have run dry, we have nothing now to sustain us ; and our hypocritical civilization is falling into an unhallowed heap of ruins. Time was when our lives were informed by faith, heroism and intelligence. Social conditions may have been rude, but men lived their lives with ardour. Now money is the one thing in life ; and all our aims and aspirations are centred on material enjoyment. Look round about ! In the

Middle Ages the great watchwords were *trouver* (in the sense of composing noble songs) ; *se croiser*—to fight in the Crusades, to fight for the Faith ; *se retirer du monde*—to live the holy, sequestered life. What are our horrible ideals to-day ? They are summed up in such words as *arriver*—to get on ; *bluffer*—to deceive ; *truster*—to form trade combines. Nothing can stand against these things.

“ The art of thinking, the art of writing, exist no more ; and leaving out political eloquence, which is the art of verbal deception, of making promises and breaking them, of throwing dust in people’s eyes, and of hiding one’s self even from one’s self, there is nothing left to us.

“ The capitalists have replaced the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, the Paladins, the learned doctors, the great warriors, the saints and the heroes of an earlier age. Having nothing durable on which to take their stand, with no real moral capital, the peoples are seething with revolt. How are the masses to

be held in check when every individual clamours for his quota of happiness and deems that happiness consists in having plenty to eat and a motor-car of his own, but recks nothing of the larger hope, of self-denial, of sacrifice for the common weal? He never feels that he is united in a sort of family bond with the rest of mankind. We cling to a few hazy shibboleths which have no real significance, such as 'Love,' 'Fraternity'; but we attach little or no meaning to them. At the best we give them a limited and material interpretation.

"Physically unsound, rendered incapable, by our vaunted civilization, of living in accordance with nature, ravaged by the scourges of cancer and consumption, morally unstable, since it has no basis to rest upon, society seems to me to be on the eve of collapse. And since, despite its boasted progress, it is without intrinsic worth, without genius, without great men, and without ideals, since it abounds in misery and in suffering, it were well that it should perish."

“ You certainly have little love for the age.”

“ What would you ? I do not possess the faculty of self-deception, life’s only *vade mecum*. I see things as they are and behold, I see beings who, though themselves morally and intellectually worthless, oppress their fellows with every species of cruelty and injustice. If the societies of the future insist on tyrannizing over the weak, the strong must, at least, work and produce, must excel and play their several parts in order to make themselves worthy of the privileges they enjoy. But the fabric of society rests upon class-divisions, though the same dead-level of mediocrity is common to all classes, and though the same commercialism, the same greed for gross and exaggerated enjoyment everywhere prevails.”

I asked France whether he thought that, if every one were taught more or less the same thing, and if class-divisions were swept away, any benefit would result.

“ I really cannot tell,” he said. “ I see

ancient institutions sorely afflicted with decrepitude, and I don't think you can galvanize the dead back to life again. The torches of religion and the monarchy which were so dear to Balzac and which were throwing off a terrible lot of smoke, now seem, so far as I can see, to have gone out altogether. As for the Republic, which is the form of government I have for a long time past supported, it doesn't seem to me to be proof against the threatened hurricane. Anyhow, the passing of different forms of government is but a symptom. The crisis is more general than that. We are now, my friend, in the condition in which the Roman Empire found itself on the eve of the Barbarian Invasion. A world is dying and a world is coming to birth. But, *à propos*, what is your view of the Barbarian Invasion ? ”

“ What sort of view do you expect me to hold ? ”

“ Why, whatever view you think fit. As for myself, I hold that it was a scourge unparalleled in the history of the world. The

poor Græco-Roman culture, palsied and exhausted, but still alive, was swallowed up, engulfed, and with it disappeared the few ideas of compassion, of pity, of humanity, the few gleams of understanding whereof, after such immense toil, the ancients had succeeded in catching a fleeting glimpse. Yes, it spelled the downfall of all ; and yet, behold, it heralded the dawn of a new order.

“ It was rotten ; it had grown sterile and toneless ; it had no longer any life-giving force, this ancient and once splendid civilization. Entombed within its frozen creeds, its fountains of art had run dry ; its literature was devoid of inspiration. The time had come for it to be swept away, for the scourge of God, for Attila and the Huns, to pass through its midst, sowing the whirlwind and the tempest, in order that a new world—our world—should rise out of the ruins.

“ Something of a like nature is happening to-day, or rather will happen to-morrow. Nor is this, of which I speak, a malady peculiar to

France. All Europe is suffering from a similar latent evil. Forgetful of the Great Past, unmindful of her ancient glories, she lives from day to day, expectant of the change to come.

“As far back as the time when I was collecting materials for my story of Gallio’s meeting with Saint Paul, I was much impressed to realize the extent to which Rome, in the early centuries of our era, had become pseudo-humanitarian, capitalistic, socialistic. I think that when they are drawing near their end, all civilizations invest themselves with the same ideas. At all events, in Rome where the wealth was in the hands of a few monstrously opulent families, while the rest of the world was perishing of hunger, Christianity—which was a sort of preliminary experiment in Communism, a revolution from beneath—was not, as we are asked to believe, a purely religious movement, but much rather a social one, proclaiming equality among all men, stirring up the masses against their rulers; and it

played its part in throwing open the way to the establishment of the New Order."

"And do you think that all this will happen again?"

"We must not seek to foretell the future. Nothing is certain in the course of human events, and I think there is nothing more rash or more foolish than to set up as a prophet. But I scan the horizon in vain for any other means of doing away with what is rotten and decayed, save a revolution; though I earnestly hope that when it comes, it will come gradually and be unattended by bloodshed. But let us not deceive ourselves. It may be that the gods will again show themselves athirst, as has often happened before.

"In that case we shall be victims of the general upheaval. The first to suffer in the Revolution of '93 were its own prophets and adepts. Those who hail and belaud the coming change will perish in it like the rest, and the suffering will, perhaps, be terrible, as it always is when the tempest awakes. But afterwards

a happier state of affairs will come to pass and the race will be free to march forward, to begin the journey anew."

Suddenly, Anatole France fell silent, and an expression of indescribable gloom overspread his countenance.

"Begin anew!" he said again at last. "So what we term progress may, after all, be nothing but an eternal beginning over again. Are we then to take it that man will never do aught but plod and plod, turning like a mill-horse round and round a mill? It almost looks as if it were so; for humanity hardly changes, and whatsoever is, is only what has ever been. Life undergoes but little change, and the course of its evolution is defined and governed by its appetites and instincts. We do but mark time in the same spot. Unless man is succeeded by another and a higher race, as man himself took the place of the ape, periods of servitude and periods of revolt will continue to succeed one another eternally, brief periods of calm following on sanguinary

upheavals and, always brooding over the scene, an immense but unavailing pity.

“ But we must make up our minds to retain the illusion of marching onwards, even though we suspect we are but moving in a circle. Even so we must front, like men, the inscrutable, the impenetrable future, redoubtable and perhaps barren though it prove to be.”

I remember the sadness that descended upon Anatole France, as these concluding words fell from his lips. It seemed as if a mist hung before his eyes, though the lights still played in them.

- After the war, I heard him express himself more hopefully about the future.

Greatly as it disturbed his mind, the thrills and excitements of those days had acted on him like a tonic. He saw, it is true, no reason for rejoicing ; but things appeared less stagnant, as though in a ferment with the promise of something new that was coming to birth.

But it must be confessed that he was perpetually changing his ideas. He was highly

susceptible to passing impressions, always detecting several possible solutions to any given problem and following out each one to its conclusion.

II

SOCIALISM AND CHRISTIANITY



AT La Béchellerie, one day after lunch, seeing Anatole France in a good mood, and being almost alone with him—there was no one there but Madame and my daughter—I turned the conversation, of set purpose, on to the subject of Socialism.

France always displayed great indulgence towards me—an indulgence based, I think, on some mutual bond of sympathy. In return I opened my heart to him and spoke freely, dispensing with any sort of conventional reserve. That day, I remember, I told him that having no political opinions of my own, I was not in the least shocked or taken aback by his ; I merely felt surprise, I said, at the

contrast so strikingly exhibited between the Extremist of to-day, with his encouragement, not merely of Socialism, but of Bolshevism, and the Conservative of former times, with his respect for law and order, his reverence for tradition, his appreciation of the amenities of a culture based on an aristocracy of the intellect and postulating abundant leisure. In conclusion I smilingly reminded him of that exquisite passage in *The Red Lily*, in which he undisguisedly expressed the aversion which the doctrine of equality was capable of arousing.

For a moment or two, France remained silent. He took off his red skull-cap and scratched his head with energy, as he was wont to do when he found himself threatened, at equal range, by the travail of thought and the burden of ennui. Then, in that curious, rather drawling tone which generally portended a lengthy discourse, he began :

“What it comes to,” he said, “is this. You want me to tell you why I am a Socialist. The simplest and truest answer I could make you

would be to say 'I don't know myself.' In point of fact, reason has no more to do with the moulding of our political ideas than it has with the formation of our tastes. In politics as in our personal sympathies and antipathies, we are, willy-nilly, repelled and attracted by mysterious forces quite outside our reason. For example, the great personal liking I had for Jaurès, as well as the equally great personal antipathy I had to certain anti-Dreyfusites who shall be nameless, doubtless had a good deal to do with making me a Socialist. Yes, personal feeling has a great deal to do with our politics. Your great political leaders, who take their stand on this side or on that, are moved by the same kind of motives and the same passionate enthusiasm as inspire your great lovers and your great mystics."

And smiling, as his thoughts reverted to those phantoms of the past who had wrought their spell upon him and whom he had called back to life in many a glowing page, he continued :

“Take, for example, the jealous passion entertained by Farinata degli Uberti for Florence, the city of his heart. It is just like Dante’s love for Beatrice, or rather Paolo’s for Francesca. Farinata preferred to destroy Florence rather than see the city in the hands of an opposing faction. Then, when there was a danger that Florence would be destroyed in the struggle, he rescinded his command in an outburst of passionate affection. He was not so courageous as Othello ; he could not slay the faithless one. No, logic has nothing to do with our political sympathies. More often than not, they are dictated by reasons in which reason plays no part.”

He was silent for a moment and then held up his hands in protest when he saw my daughter peeling an apple—a thing that set his teeth on edge. He declared that he could never understand how people could eat apples at all.

Then, returning to the subject of our conversation, he went on :

“I might have told you that I was a

Socialist because Fate had ordained it so ; but that would not have been true. In point of fact, I have done too much thinking, and unluckily, intellect in me has got the better of instinct. Therefore it is that I am rarely moved by sentiment. No, my Socialism is the outcome of a logical process. I will unfold to you my reasons, and if you succeed in making out my meaning, you will realize well enough that I am bound to be a Socialist, and that neither eccentricity nor pique has led me to embrace that creed.

“ First of all then, let us make our minds clear on one fundamental point. ”

“ I do not like the present state of affairs, this tyranny of wealth, this reign of standardized mediocrity, which brutalizes and debases Europe. I am anxious for a change. That is the first point. That is clear.

“ Well, then, my friend, when we dislike the present, we have one of two courses open to us. We must either go back or go forward. So much is evident. We need not labour that.

“Let us, first of all, give a glance at the Past.

“I am not now going to lay it down that the Past only seems preferable to the Present because it *is* the Past. But I do really think that what charms us about bygone times is the subdued and softening light in which we view them, and the inevitable vagueness with which we visualize them. There never was a time in which men did not feel an irrational longing for the things that are no more. Even Hesiod was given to bewailing the corruption and decadence of his own times.

• “If we are tempted to sing the praises of the Past, it is merely that we look upon it as through a golden haze. Do not imagine that I set too high a value on those benefits which we are wont to call Liberty and Equality because I tell you that I am discontented with the existing régime. I am well aware that the great difficulty is not to win Liberty, but to be worthy of it, to use it well when we have won it. But no matter. We are better off

to-day than we were of old. Great was the oppression, and dire the injustice we suffered under the old régime. No doubt there was greater continuity, a larger measure of the logical element among the rulers of those days, because of the influence of tradition, and tradition is an asset to which a republican form of government cannot lay claim. Moreover, men talked less, and consequently did more. Finally, a king took some practical interest in fostering the common weal because he was, so to speak, managing his own estate, whereas the sole concern of the ministers of a republic is to cling to office, to exploit the present, to make hay while the sun shines. They make no attempt to lead, but are for ever scanning the faces of the six hundred deputies round about them in the attempt to read therein what the public want them to do. Renan has given us a pretty good*summary of the drawbacks inherent in a republic, namely, lack of continuity, lack of responsibility, and lack of cohesion. All the same, in the old days, men

were far more likely to become slaves, in mind and body, than they are now. And fools were more dangerous, because they were more firmly entrenched. Mediocrity may not have been so widespread, but cruelty and intolerance were a great deal more so.

“ No, we shall not ameliorate the social conditions of the present by trying to bring back a state of things which only appeals to us because it belongs to the past. Nor should I be in favour of restoring Catholicism to its ancient pride of place. Taine and a whole host of his disciples belaud its beneficent effects. And, indeed, there are some grounds for lamenting the disappearance of an age when miracles were wrought by the power of faith ; when hearts beat high with generous hopes, and when the spur of a lofty ideal prompted men to acts of renunciation, made suffering welcome and inspired deeds of the sublimest heroism. A divine madness possessed the world, and the Kingdom of God had, in very truth, come down upon the earth—

in the only way it could come, namely, by casting out reason.

“ But it is just here, precisely in this respect, that any attempt to resuscitate the dead past seems to me not only undesirable but impossible. How can you hope to bring back to the present age that childlike innocence, that sublime *naïveté*, necessary for the revival of such ideas, since, in Russia itself—a land in which such irrational movements flourish exceedingly—the task has been found so difficult ?

“ In reality the error—not Taine’s error, because, for all his love of the Past, he was clear-sighted enough to recognize the impossibility of marching backwards—but the error committed by his followers, is that, while realizing that mankind must have its ideal, and that the world is the poorer for the loss of it, they look for it, not before them, but behind.

“ I, too, lament the disappearance of a universal ideal. But I am not at all anxious to restore an ideal that is worn out and fraught with danger. For we must not shut our eyes

to the darker side of Christianity, to the shadow which hung over Europe for so long, the horrors born of its intolerant spirit—horrors which, at the slightest opportunity, would break out with all their ancient fury. No, I should like to see something different from that. That an old man should long for his lost youth is perfectly natural ; but he will not find it by pursuing the road to his second childhood.

“ I confess that a new ideal, nay, a new religion, is what I myself am in quest of. But I turn my gaze towards the morrow ; I look to the Future. An ideal and a religion, a real republic and a real Christianity, that is what we hope Socialism will prove to be. At any rate, Socialism will mean a change ; it will bring about the abolition of that intellectual stagnation in which we have lingered so long.”

And when, after lunch, we returned to the drawing-room, with its treasures of the greatest variety and most dubious authenticity, alleged examples of the Flemish, Italian and French

schools, France brought the conversation back again to the same theme.

“ If,” he said, warming to his subject, “ Bourget really wanted to restore Christianity in all its pristine force and vigour, he should follow my example and turn Socialist. What is it these reactionaries want ? They want us to make our peace with religion and to place ourselves once more beneath the banner of the spiritual power. But it is not our place, not for us, to go to religion ; it is for religion to reconquer us. It is not by some sort of artificial means, and without the inspiration of a living faith, nor by submitting to the Pôpe, that we shall ever make Christianity blossom forth anew in the world. For the Church to regain the victory, she must employ the weapons proper to herself, which are not political machination and intrigue, but charity, heroism and self-sacrifice. And thus, un-awares, by rekindling the flame of evangelical charity, the world would, in the end, be brought to embrace Socialism. But yes ! I tell you

that long before I threw in my lot with Jaurès, I pointed out the means by which we might hope once more to behold the sublime age of faith and pity. I singled out the sole remedies that had been successful in the past, and which might succeed once more to-day, the sublime folly of self-denial as mirrored in the monastic life, the burning charity and unselfish zeal of the followers of Saint Francis. M. Bourget should persuade the Pope to imitate his heroic predecessors, Peter and Clement. Scorning alike knowledge, worldly power and wealth, casting aside everything that tends to immobilize or hamper him, let the Vicar of Christ 'travel light,' without impedimenta ; let him put on again the original garments of poverty, innocence and ignorance of the world and its ways, setting an example to the world, denouncing the rich, defying the proud, proclaiming the dawn of an era of charity, the advent of a world in which all men shall be equal ; let him stand up boldly against injustice, and, abandoning all his possessions, let him go forth

into the world as the despised and rejected of men, requiring henceforth no companion save Poverty, the bride of Saint Francis, desiring no insignia of greatness save the signs of election which were borne by the Innocent of Assisi—I mean the imprint of the nails and the spear, the stigmata of his crucified Saviour. He would become a target for the whole world's mockery, and by the power of his suffering, he would rise in triumph, upborne on the wings of his ideal.

“ And he would set Christianity—that is to say, Socialism—upon an enduring basis ; for the real Antichrist to-day, the demon that must be driven forth, the earthly tyrant that must be overthrown, is Capital, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the debasing of ideals by the lust for gain. To abolish and annihilate class distinctions, such is the crusade beneath whose banners we should march to-day.

“ In short, I am a Christian ; I am one with the only truly logical Christians of our time—the Socialists. It was the anarchists of Rome

and the East who originally brought about the victory of Christ. And still, to-day as then, they are the true fighting forces, the sole resources of the Christian hosts. For Christianity cannot be brought back to life by the calling up of ghosts from the tomb, as our romantics of to-day appear to believe ; nor by painfully unearthing the dusty relics of an obsolete scholasticism—not by such means shall we restore the power of Christianity, but by relying on the real and living Christian virtues, by recovering and making use of the unfailing leaven of the primitive Church.

“ Besides,” he went on, rising to his feet, “ our opponents know all about that as well as we do. They would refashion the world, but they don’t wish to change anything. They are afraid of the damage. They want everything to be transformed, yet nothing is to move. A change of personnel, a reactionary Government, the re-establishment of the Concordat would, in their eyes, be like a resurrection from the dead, a new birth. They

have no outlook and no courage. Just as their patriotism forbids them to go as far as Farinata, so they dare not, for all their anxiety to behold the restoration of the monarchy, strive for the victory of the Imperial Party in Germany ; and so also, from fear of too violent an upheaval, they will not destroy the old order before proceeding to build up the new. A new edifice is what they desire, and to clear the ground of old encumbrances before beginning to erect it is an elementary rule of the builder's art. But no. In defiance of experience and of common sense, and without any precedent in the whole of recorded history, they look to the forces of reaction to bring about the triumph of their cherished aspirations.

“ It seems, however, quite clear that the one essential characteristic of the Past is that it can never return. It is vain to summon it from the shades, as some of our contemporaries are fain to do ; it will not come back. One of the periods which have interested me the most, from the religious point of view, one to

which I have devoted most careful study, is that of Julian the Apostate. What whole-hearted and unanimous efforts does it not reveal to us in its endeavour to return to a state of affairs that had been left behind ! What a wealth of genius was enlisted in the attempt to further a cause which, from the beginning, was fore-doomed to failure ! What discipline and what method were put at the disposal of the enthusiasm and power with which its champions laboured in a hopeless enterprise ! It is always a useless task to try to bring the dead to life, and it was a wise saying and a true one of old Heraclitus, who observed that ‘we can never ascend the same river twice.’ We can but recall the departed for a fleeting instant by some sort of necromancy, such as Ulysses employed when he gave them blood to drink, or such as writers use when, by their art, they make them live their lives over again, within the pages of a book.

“ And to-day especially, now that the war is over, we see more clearly than ever how

impossible it is to set outworn systems of government on their base again. There is nothing so futile, nothing so inherently impossible. But our political romantics are devoid alike of critical and historical experience ; and they are blinded by desire. Passion, conviction if you like, hides the light from their eyes. They think they can leap over a whole century—and what a century !—backwards.

“ No, there is no going back to the Past ! Once again I repeat, I do not regret it. Even if I thought the experiment less hopeless than I do, I should not care to attempt it. Moreover, the idea of going backwards, the mere idea of the thing, upsets me and gives me a headache.”

And the idea did, in fact, seem to cause him actual physical discomfort. He seemed as though he had been rubbed up the wrong way. All the same, he was continually taking off his skull-cap and scratching his head ; he had a pinched look about the nose, his brows were knitted in a frown, and his whole attitude

seemed to betoken extreme nervous irritation. He rose up slowly, we following, and made his way to the little annexe called "The Warren," which was then in course of construction at La Béchellerie.

III

THE CITY OF THE FUTURE



UT on another occasion, a long time before the talk recorded in the last section, France expatiated, in my hearing, on the future of society. It was one day, at Madame de Caillavet's, when M. Guglielmo Ferrero was present and there had been a good deal of talk about Rome and the rule of the Cæsars.

I think it was I who said, in a sort of bantering way, how the account he had given in the last part of *The White Stone* of the City of the Future had proved anything but an encouragement to us to embrace the tenets of Socialism.

Doctor P., who was present, added that a society without intellectual interests, without the stimulus of ambition, without art which soothes and exalts, without anything to fire the ardour or excite the rivalry of its inhabitants, would be a dull sort of place to live in.

“ No doubt it would ! ” answered Anatole France. “ But, nevertheless, I would have you observe that no one among us could tolerate, for a moment, living in the future. My city does not make one feel any more or any less at home than the Utopias of William Morris or H. G. Wells. All these imaginary pictures of what the world will be in time to come are like so much cold water down your back, merely because the conditions I depicted are so different from our own. We only want to live in order that we may go on keeping in touch with the thousand and one things which we know so well and which are inextricably interwoven with our past. If to make a journey is in part to die, to project ourselves into another state of society, where the customs

and everything about us are completely unfamiliar, would be self-annihilation of the most intolerable description. It was always so. Despite our progress and the material advantages we enjoy, Socrates or Cicero, Rabelais or Racine, would feel decidedly out of their element if they were called upon to live as we live to-day."

"But all your Socialist state has to boast of is tranquillity and equality; both of them negative qualities. It would be a dull place and no mistake."

"Well, yes, I grant you that the picture I drew in my book of what life will be like in the future is detestable. But I alone am to blame for that."

Then turning to me, he said :

"Have you noticed that the end of my little book belies the beginning? There is one story in *The White Stone* to which I attach a lot of importance—I mean *Gallio*. I took a great deal of pains over that tale. In order to get the exact key of the Roman attitude

regarding religion, I read and meditated a great deal more than you might imagine. However, it is not its exact documentation, nor the accuracy of its local colour on which I pride myself in *Gallio*. What I do congratulate myself upon is the moral of the story, which is this, that no one can foretell what is going to happen in the future. I bring on the scene two Romans, two of the most enlightened men of their generation. They express everything which, with the knowledge then at their command, it was possible for them to foresee in regard to the line religious development would take in the future. They scan the farthest limits of the horizon. They are animated by an ardent desire to learn the truth and they search for it conscientiously. One thing only escapes their notice, and that is the eccentricities of a little Jew who is going about preaching some curious gospel or other. When, with considerable annoyance, Gallio interrupts the conversation to go and intervene in a quarrel between Paul and the Jews,

who have fallen foul of one another, it never dawns on him that this wretched, obscure individual possesses the key to the riddle which he, Gallio, is trying so earnestly to resolve. The future of religion ! Why, there it was personified in this sickly visionary, who expressed himself with such a halting utterance. And Gallio never suspected it ! ”

Then, addressing himself to Madame de Caillavet, and speaking rapidly and authoritatively in order to prevent her interrupting him and making him lose his thread, as she seemed about to do, France continued :

•“ We never see into the future, and I made an error when I pretended to draw a picture of society in times to come, seeing that in the same book I had declared that all such vaticination was impossible. It was only child’s play, all that. How will the future be moulded by Socialism ? In reality I know but one thing, and that is that no one knows anything about it. One can but form conjectures based on an analogy with the past. But the essential

characteristic of the future is precisely that it leaves the past behind it. The past is dead, and you cannot build up a living being by assembling the *disjecta membra* of a corpse.

“ A prophetic maid or a Sibyl, Joan of Arc or the seeress of Cumæ, might be able to tell you what the world will be like in future ages ; but I am no prophet.”

“ However, it needs no prophet to foresee that the way to your social equality lies through anarchy and revolution,” was somebody’s remark. “ Suffering and violence will hold the field and it will be through rivers of blood that the race will make its way towards the Atlantis of the future.”

“ It is possible, and possible, too, that the heralds of the new régime will also be its first martyrs. There was a prophecy of Cazotte’s which La Harpe has handed down to us—a prophecy in which the gentle visionary gave warning to the brilliant philosophers, the great intellects of Louis the Sixteenth’s reign, that the age of Liberty and Reason, which

they so ardently longed for, would lose them their heads. They were incredulous, amazed. Little they knew of the vicissitudes of human fortunes.

“Suffering, cruelty and injustice—such are the fermenting processes which necessarily precede the foundation of every ideal, every religion. The ancients believed that it was with the blood of Remus, shed by his own brother, that the corner-stone of Rome was immutably cemented. And even if I were told that a revolution would bring suffering in its train, I should nevertheless welcome it, though I hate to see men suffer. I hate suffering, injustice, anarchy, the eclipse of knowledge and culture, the destruction of the amenities of civilization. But more than all that, I detest mediocrity and sterility. After all, to suffer is to live, and to live intensely.”

“It is ever above the ruins of one world that we behold the dawn of its successor. Has it never occurred to you that cruelty is only destroyed by cruelty? We quit not

the realms of sorrow, save through the gate of sorrow."

And then turning to Doctor P., he said :

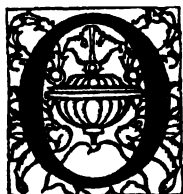
" A body-politic is like a human body. It needs a crisis to free it from the grip of disease.

" I am convinced, and it is the fruit of all my long experience, that for everything we must pay the price, and that if we would behold the advent of an era of justice, we must resign ourselves to its coming to us by way of injustice, cruelty and slaughter."

He was silent. Then he went to welcome a new arrival and began to talk of other things.

**ANATOLE FRANCE AND
EINSTEIN**

ANATOLE FRANCE AND EINSTEIN



ONE afternoon, going up to La Béchellerie, I found Anatole France alone with his grandson. It happened to be during Einstein's brief visit to Paris.

We began to talk about style—literary style—and Anatole France quoted some passages from Flaubert, which he rightly characterized as flat and ill-written. Then, changing the subject abruptly, he said :

“ Surely, we ought to be a little more moved than we are over this great universe that has just died so suddenly.”

“ What universe ? ” I inquired, somewhat taken aback.

“ Why, the late universe, yesterday's universe, Newton's universe, if you are pleased

to call it so ; the one that was infinite and had but three dimensions, but which had something palpable about it, something solid you could kick against—I mean Matter. Now, here are you—I say ‘ you,’ for I have as good as quitted it—here are you in a universe which is for ever changing, like a sort of chameleon ; which contains nothing, the whole being circular and, for that very reason, over and done with. You can go all round it. Tell me now, don’t you feel a little bit cramped for room in it, my friend ? ”

And without waiting for me to reply, he went on :

“ Like Thamus, the mariner of Massalia who, amid the tears and lamentations of the Nymphs and Satyrs, received tidings that the great god Pan was dead, I myself was among the first to learn that the Grand-All-in-All, which we knew so well and which, for two hundred years, had been so familiar to our forefathers, was now, at length, no more. Yes, I knew Einstein when he was not so much

talked about as he is to-day. I met him and had a talk with him in Germany. And now I have seen him again, and renewed acquaintanceship with him, this very day. He is a very intelligent man, with a thoughtful, expressive face, and more than a hint of astuteness in his look."

"And his theory? What about that?"

"Why, it appears to be of considerable importance. To begin with, it flies in the face of common sense, and that is a great point. The mind cannot grasp it, yet the facts confirm it. That is what I find striking and really new in the universe which Einstein brings us. For he brings it to us in his palm, just as in Byzantine pictures Christ is depicted holding the sphere in His right hand.

"Well, now! Hitherto the various cosmic systems have fitted into our craniums. This one refuses to do so. From the point of view of the man in the street, it is absurd. It is an outrage on reason. That is what is really great about it. To say that a round ball of steel

becomes lozenge-shaped when in motion is pure folly. Yet the folly seems to be true and susceptible of proof."

"So, then, you accept Einstein's theory?"

"Why, certainly! I accept it, in the first place, because I am incompetent to criticize it. And incompetence, as I dare say you have observed, is a crooked quality. Its advantage is that it enables us to hitch on to anything. Besides, Einstein's theory is true, absolutely true. We've got proof."

"What proof?"

"Why, it explains all the facts that were beyond the range of its aged and Newtonian mother. It seems that for nearly fifty years now, there have been scientific phenomena which did not harmonize with our conception of the universe. The thing was uncomfortable. It brought a blush to the cheeks of our scientists, who are highly sensitive to shame. Creation had begun to have whims, to indulge in the vapours. Ether, which we had been at great pains to invent, was no longer able to do

all the work required of it. Electro-magnetism, though still a youngster, began to kick over the traces and play the deuce with things. In short, our system of physics was departing this life. It already had an unpleasant dead-body smell about it. We anxiously scanned the horizon. We needed an Einstein. And now behold, the Messiah is amongst us ! ”

“ Certainly his theory clears up everything. ”

“ Moreover, the facts support it. Astronomers have verified it and so has the microscope. ”

“ So, then, you regard it as true ? ”

• “ Certainly, true for another hundred years at least. ”

“ How do you mean, for another hundred years ? ”

France looked puzzled at my question.

“ Well, then, ” he added rather sharply, “ if you think a hundred too much, make it eighty. ”

And as I still looked a little nonplussed, he said :

“That’s the average life of a scientific truth ; just two or three generations. As for historic truths, their constitution is far more delicate. The least puff of wind blows them over.”

“But if these truths die, they must be lies, not truths ; for what, after all, is truth ? ”

France turned to me with a polite smile.

“I would have you observe,” said he, “that you are asking me exactly what Pilate asked of Jesus. The question seemed a trifle embarrassing and no reply was vouchsafed on that occasion. I shall try to improve on that.”

He got up to restore a book to its shelf. Then coming back to us, he said :

“What is truth ?

“To begin with, my friend, I believe that if it be a question of Absolute Truth, we could make answer in the words that Voltaire puts into the mouth of Spinoza who, addressing the Deity, says :

‘Between ourselves, I don’t believe You exist.’ ”

“ But the truths we have in mind are purely relative.”

“ Exactly ! Truths in the Einsteinian sense. Time, place—all sorts of things might modify them. They proceed from human knowledge and they are subject to human metamorphoses. In the realms of Science and History, a truth is merely a theory to which, for the time being, nothing offers any contradiction. When our explanation of a fact receives the assent of all, because it appears to fit in with the rest of our accepted ideas, we call it true.

• “ But how can this truth be stable, seeing that every day we are discovering new facts ? That theory of ours, which so comfortably accommodated the facts of yesterday, is not capacious enough to embrace to-day’s as well.

“ So we are for ever patching up our old truths or putting new ones in their place. We are told that the human body changes every seven years. The majority of human truths

are renewed every hundred years, or thereabouts, with a few very rare exceptions, which may last a thousand.

“ Thus the Ptolemaic system was a truth for those who lived two hundred years before Christ. It clashed with none of the ideas of the period, and therefore we can say that, for that particular age, it did express the truth. In Galileo’s day, it had become decrepit and out of working order.

“ The amusing thing is that the most abstract truths, precisely because they have no contact with facts, are the longest lived of all. Thus, after two thousand years, Euclid’s geometry is taught in our schools with little or no modification. Nothing, however, is more arbitrary. People will tell you that it is merely a work of art. Other systems of geometry, not based on the straight line, have been invented since Euclid’s day. We have had curved geometries, corkscrew geometries, all of which are quite as well-behaved as the Euclidian. It was by basing his ideas on a

non-Euclidian system that Einstein made his great discovery."

"So there is no such thing as absolute truth—truth with a capital 'T'?"

"No; but there are truths that live and die just as we do. Define truth, if you will, as the conclusion, the summing up of everything we know to-day, the algebraical sum of all the things that are known about the world at this present moment of our lives. When other observations, other facts, other ideas come to be added to our stock, our sum will be no longer correct, our truth will cease to be The Truth."

"And what becomes of the Truth?"

"Why, then, my friend, the Truth retires once more into our little brain-pan. Don't expel it from its miserable lodging. It would be all at sea. Moreover, the outer world changes, does it not? Well, then?"

"Our friend," said he, turning towards his grandson, "will now explain to us Einstein's theory in detail. Yes, Lucien ought to know something more about it. Besides, he's really

interested. And if you could make me understand it better, it would be all to the good."

"What I find most entertaining of all," said I, "are the deductions based by Monsieur Langevin on Einstein's theories."

"Tell us about them. Listen carefully now, Lucien," he added, turning to his grandson. "He's going to talk about important, strange and marvellous things."

France was quite serious.

So I began to tell the boy, whom I have known ever since he was a baby and who is very dear to me, all about Michelson's experiment.

The old man's eyelids gradually began to close. Five minutes later, he was snoring placidly. Lucien and I stole out on tip-toe.

THE GAME OF METAPHYSICS

THE GAME OF METAPHYSICS



THE author of *Thaïs* was always eloquent when the vanity of philosophical systems was the subject of discussion. And he was particularly fond of discoursing on the inanity of metaphysics.

Some exceptionally animated observations, which he made at La Béchellerie one day in March 1918, come back vividly to my mind.

“I have been writing a little bit lately,” said Anatole France one day when I went to see him. “What do you think it is all about?”

It was, I remember, in the morning, and the company consisted of his wife, a gentleman from Tours, and two foreigners whom I had not met before.

“I’ve been writing about old Heraclitus.

I was asked to write a short preface for a translation of his fragments, and I wrote it when I was down in the South ; and when I got home again, I read on and on in the pages of that dismal old nincompoop Diogenes Laertius. (What a misfortune only to be able to get at the Greek philosophers through the medium of a nonentity like that !) And I became possessed of a burning curiosity concerning this giant mind—for a giant he was. Of course, there was not room to say anything about him within the limits of a preface. But now that I have been able to reflect about the matter, I have a clearer notion of the problem enunciated by the Ephesian philosopher. And then"—this was for me in particular—"a Tragedy ! Come now, we must have a Tragedy about him ! Now, listen carefully to what I say. We are not, by any means, dealing with a system-mongering philosopher, with a mere empty theorizer. Heraclitus, it seems to me, was the first man to look life in the face ; the first man to recognize its terror.

It was then that, turning away from his fellow-men, ashamed alike for them and for himself, he went to dwell like an anchorite upon a mountain, eating nothing but roots. Pessimism, the true, the only attitude of any man who consents seriously to meditate on the world, was born with Heraclitus. It was a landmark in the history of thought.

“Now, don’t let us make any mistake. The Greeks of Alexandria, having a great eye for antitheses, contrasted Heraclitus the Weeper with Democritus the Laugher, as typifying the two attitudes with which, it is supposed, we are permitted to confront the problem of existence. All that is superficial. There is, in fact, only one possible attitude, and that is the terror of Heraclitus. Those who smile, as I myself smile, when they contemplate the enigma, only do so for fear their Fear should crush them.

“Aye, it was a grandiose adventure on which the Ephesian embarked. He it was who, before and more clearly than any other,

discovered the underlying tragedy of life ; he it was who discovered that nothing is stable, nothing abides, that everything is transitory and evanescent, and that Man and the intellect of man, whereof we make so proud a vaunt, are not so much as the shadow of a shadow.

“ There have been preserved to us some few of his formulæ. We have nought, indeed, save his formulæ ; but that renders his discovery the more mysterious, the more striking. They must have pierced him like swords, those truths which he was the first to grasp. The vulture that gnawed at the vitals of Prometheus was nothing compared with the gigantic melancholy that was devouring Heracles when he said to himself : ‘ Everything fleeteth-by even as a stream ; all things pass away and are no more ; nothing is that abides. To be is no more real than not to be ; and the only reality in the world is Destruction, War, the Sovereign Mother of all things ; for all things exist only to clash one against another, so that all things may perish.’ And

having seen the vanity of life, the Ephesian beheld yet another vision. It was that there is neither virtue, nor vice, nor good, nor evil, nor day nor night, nor summer, nor winter. For nothing exists save by virtue of its opposite, whence it follows that all our values are false. It is evil which makes it possible for good to exist, and which is the base thereof ; and it is vice which makes it possible to conceive the idea of virtue. ‘ *Good and evil, all one,*’ says one of his terrible fragments. And again he says, ‘ *Life and Death are one and the same thing.*’ ”

Anatole France was particularly impressed with this idea, and he referred to it in a preface which he was to write the following year for *Naïs au Miroir*. He repeated it again, and then having rubbed his face with both hands, he resumed :

“ How readily one can understand Heraclitus’ misanthropy and the barrier he was fain to interpose between himself and his fellows. He only came down from his mountain in

order to deposit his book in the Temple of Diana, that book in which he had set forth darkly his terrible discoveries. For well he knew that truths so deadly should be hidden from the uninitiate. Redoubtable was the nature of the things which Heraclitus disclosed, albeit 'under the rose,' to ears that were worthy to learn his secrets.

"In a word and to conclude, Heraclitus seems to me to be the leader of those aristocrats of the mind whom melancholy has marked for her own, because they are given to meditation.

"It is since the coming of the Ephesian that Melancholy has gone her ways up and down the world—Melancholy whom Dürer shows us brooding over the Universe."

"Yes," I answered, "Heraclitus was probably the first to discover the malady of pessimism ; and that is why Nietzsche hailed him as a master."

"Clearly," answered France musingly. "Only, whether our philosophic ideas sadden

or console us, it is, in either case, the result of a delusion. Yes, of a great delusion. We are wont, in fact, to imagine that, by a long process of thought and reflection, it is possible for us to unveil any secret we will. We deem that no department of knowledge is closed to us. Proud of his attributes as a thinking animal, man has rashly sought to build up, on the basis of his intellectual powers, a grandiose edifice which, forsooth, is supposed to explain and interpret all things. He has created philosophy and attaches a serious value to the pale illusions of his senses. He has reared the monstrous Babel Tower of metaphysics on the shifting sands of his own sensations. And this Tower of Babel, which is but a silly toy, overshadows him, withal, and fills his heart with sadness."

"Why, Monsieur France, are you so hard upon this 'philosophia,' this 'love of wisdom,' which is one of the noblest aspirations of man, and which sets, if anything does, the seal of divinity upon him?"

“I think with you,” he replied, “that philosophy is a noble occupation. I merely hold that we should beware lest it make us vainglorious. To be imprisoned in a gloomy cavern and to aspire to speak with certitude concerning what is taking place outside it, to make use of language, of words which are but uttered tokens of our own inward state and to claim thus to interpret the mystery of the universe around us, to employ our fitful and ever-changing reason, which is the product of our physical being and varies with the condition of our organs, in order to learn the secrets of a world of things with which we have no immediate contact—why, it is absurd ; and yet, that is the sum-total of philosophy. As for its results, its real results, they are nothing more nor less than laughable. To fix notions, your metaphysician denies them ; to grasp objects, he annihilates them ; to define them, he makes them indefinite. Plato, in order to find, through the medium of ideas, a foothold in the world of phenomena, begins by making

an abstraction of that same world, by robbing it of its shape, its colour and its individuality. To escape from a world of phenomena, he invents a world of phantoms. His system of metaphysics, like all such systems, is but a counter-illusion intended to nullify the illusion of the many. The common illusion, the illusion of the senses, can at least boast of some sort of vague support, whereas the *infinity*, the *immensity*, the *absolute* of the metaphysicians are negative illusions, entities which refuse to be, veritable shadows of a shadow. Wait ! Would you like me to draw you a picture, which would, more appropriately than any other, sum up the history of philosophy ? Imagine a madman standing everlastingly at the brink of a dark well, at the bottom of which he thinks he can see something moving, something he thinks new, something he has never seen before, but which, in reality, is nothing but his own shadow. In metaphysics we never see anything but our own shadow, and the shadow of our own ignorance."

“ If that be so, it only remains to us to doubt of everything, to follow not Plato or Aristotle, but Pyrrho, and not even to be certain whether one be dead or alive.”

“ Mind you do no such thing, my friend. But there ! I am not disturbed. You could not, if you would. We ought, indeed, to doubt of everything, ourselves included, but we cannot. Whoever doubts must needs seal up his lips and his mind for ever. But how can one do that ? Before that, men would cease to be men ! ”

“ Well, then, what is one to do ? ”

“ What we are doing now. Go on philosophizing, but philosophizing without ever losing sight of just what our wisdom is worth. Let us go on turning round and round in the prison of our own brain, like a squirrel in its cage. Let us go on gibbering words, cries, grunts, to express the profundities of our cogitations. We are bound to. We can no other. It is our lot. We are thinking animals and we must perforce go on thinking. Philosophy

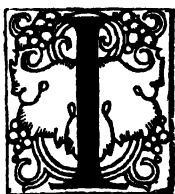
is as necessary to man as breath is to life. But don't let us be in a fool's paradise ; don't let us imagine we have any more cause to be proud of our achievements than children have of their toy soldiers. Don't let us hope for the impossible ; we cannot escape from ourselves. Don't let us boast that we know the unknowable."

Then, after a long silence, he went on :

" Ah, well ! I agree with you ; philosophy is a fine thing. It is by meditating on his own being, on his destiny, on Fate, that Man made acquaintance with suffering, the sole and primordial instrument of all perfection. We tell ourselves it was in the days of Heraclitus that Melancholy began to wander up and down over the face of the globe ; which is another way of saying that, since then, Man has differentiated himself in some measure from the animals. Yes, the philosopher's vocation is a lofty one, since philosophy is essentially of man."

**THE CINEMA AND THE
AMERICANS**

THE CINEMA AND THE AMERICANS



REMEMBER a singularly curious and profitable conversation I once had with Anatole France, and I wish I could give an idea of its flashes, its sidelights, its unexpected turns. These were the circumstances :

One day—it was during one of my last visits to La Béchellerie—we motored into Tours and, leaving the car at the draper's shop—as was our wont—we went sauntering about the town together, looking in at the bookshop, buying some biscuits at Potin's, where France fell into a sort of religious ecstasy over the cheeks and arms of a young shop-girl who, he said, possessed both “line and colour, a combination seldom met with.”

Afterwards, continuing our stroll, we found ourselves near the market where France drew my attention to a large cinema poster.

"Do you ever go to the cinema?" he asked, with an air of some interest, as though he were anxious to hear my reply.

I told him that I went very rarely, so rarely, indeed, that I might almost say never.

"I've been a good deal myself; you see it amuses E. Certainly the cinema interests me; but nothing like so much as the gramophone. We used to be very fond of that, Madame de C. and I. To my mind, the gramophone has one special advantage. Through it you can get at the intentions of the speaker; you can hear exactly how he pronounces, you can criticize his diction. If you want to judge an actor, make him speak into a gramophone and repeat the record two or three times. All the poor fellow's defects of impersonation and delivery will come out as clear as daylight. As for the cinema . . ."

He stopped short; then, bending over and

speaking into my ear—he always did this since the war, whenever he wanted to impart something important, as though he were afraid of being overheard—he said :

“The world-wide development of the cinema habit is one of ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.’ ”

“You mean it portends the end of the world ? ”

Not at all,” answered France protestingly, half amused and half vexed at not being understood. “The world will not come to an end till it crashes into another planet, or till the sun goes out. Now, the cinema offers nothing that is symptomatic of such an event. No, it’s not the end of the world I’m thinking about, but the end of civilization or, if you prefer, the end of one phase of European culture. The development of the cinema coincides with the disappearance of Greek and Latin from our schools.

“But don’t go and take me for a ‘misoneist’—t use Lombroso’s horrible word. No,

I follow the times. I keep up with the new conditions and do my best to fit in with them. I've been to the cinema and found it quite entertaining and interesting. Yes, the cinema is very amusing and possibly very instructive.

"Do you know what a fuss they make over some of these big American cinema stars? Why, the enthusiasm that attended the triumphs of Cæsar or marked Alexander's entry into Persepolis can hardly be compared with the delirious excitement with which people hail the arrival of 'Charlie Chaplin' or some other popular 'film star,' as they are called.

"The reason is—and it is worth noting—that the cinema appeals to all; it awakens an answering note in the popular consciousness and represents, as one may say, one of the emanations of the lower strata of humanity."

"It is, no doubt, an inferior form of art," I remarked.

"No, it's not that, it's not a question of inferior or superior. Those words imply that

a thing is higher or lower in its own kind. Now, have you ever tried to decide, in your own mind, what Art really is? Let us endeavour to define it. It will not be easy.

“To go, at once, to the root of the question, I shall lay it down that Art, ever since it came into existence, that is to say, from the time of the Greeks, has always had one end, one aim in view, that is the revelation of a supernatural world. Ah yes, but it *is* so. What we, you and I and the rest of us, call Realism, Naturalism, is either the negation of Art, or else is wrongly described. With the ancients, the artist—who, mark you, originated in the sanctuary—had as his chief mission, not to remind us of this workaday world, but to make us forget it. He made use of it, it is true, but he did so in order to bring home to us its inner meaning and, as by some magical revelation, to show us its great hidden springs of action, Sorrow, Love, Self-sacrifice.

“Nothing causes me so much surprise as

our conception of literature—and, let me add, of Art. To amuse—that, we are told, is their office. How that would amaze a Greek, or a contemporary of the Renaissance, or even of Louis the Fourteenth ! For a Greek, Tragedy or Sculpture was like a corollary of the Eleusinian mysteries, magnifying the idea of Fate, showing us man ennobled by suffering, like Ulysses, Œdipus or Laocoön, portraying all the passionate ardour, all the toil and all the pain, which at last enabled Prometheus to scale the heights of Olympus, and Antigone to discover a law transcending the law of man. Art, as a means of revelation, was one with the mysteries. It pointed out to man the sole sanctuary wherein he might find refuge from the common round of existence—namely, Beauty ; and it strove to transport him, by the power of harmony, to realms above the world of reality. And again, look at the great creators of a later Europe ; at Dante, who took on the attributes of God and sat in judgment on the quick and the dead ; at Milton, who

resuscitated the mystery of the seven days and the labours wrought therein ; at Shakespeare, Calderon, Racine, who exalted the heroic nature of man, and gloriously portrayed the grandeur of the passions. Consider also Michael Angelo, who limned for us beings endowed with supernatural energy and god-like mien, as though to point out to man the way of perfection ; and, yet again, Rembrandt, who flooded creation with light as though foretelling the glories of some unrisen day.

“ Such, then, properly regarded, is literature,* such is art—gleams from a higher world, or a vision of the apotheosis of man.

“ What have we retained of all that ? Already the middle of the nineteenth century, with the triumphant advent of panjournalism and naturalism, has bestowed on us the thing with which every decadent society has been familiar, namely, the reproduction of reality, the Chinese shadow-show of circumambient mediocrity. And then, for the first time, we

became acquainted with the serial story and all those other catch-penny newspaper devices which announced the approaching end. If I long held Zola in detestation—and I was never greatly drawn to him as a writer, not even when other circumstances brought about a *rapprochement* between us—it was because he lowered the standard of Art, not by his works—for he was not more of a naturalist than I was, and he had talent—but by his misguided ideas about æsthetics.”

Then after a moment's silence, and putting his hand on my shoulder, Anatole France resumed :

“ And now, my friend, you may tell yourself that in the worst newspaper serial, in the most glaringly absurd example of realism, no less than in the most imbecile impressionist daub—yes, in those pictures which look like a *Mardi-Gras* orgy of colour—there is something incomparably superior to the best moving picture in existence.

“ For look you ! The twenty-four letters

of Old Cadmus possess a magic power. The brush of the completest tyro can yet exert an ennobling and purifying influence. D'Ennery or Richebourg or our friend P., despite their best efforts, cannot filch from the spoken word that sort of vibration whereby, for all the garbage it is called on to convey, it comes invested with a kind of traditional, authoritative prestige. The cinema, on the other hand, does but materialize the basest popular ideals. It is a living presentment of the newspaper gossip page, an animated picture of gutter-press sensationalism. Even the animals might be entertained by it. When John Citizen goes to the 'Movies,' he sees not dreams, but the reflection of his own dream, a nightmare, in fact. He sees how the *grisette* wears her hat, how his friend is cuckolded by his wife, and how the apache commits his thefts. And the whole thing is fired off at him point-blank, without being acted upon and purified by passing through the crucible of a mind, no matter how ordinary a mind, without the words by which

even a poor actor lends dignity and character to his gestures. The Athenians, who penalized a dramatic poet because he served them up a crude, ready-made play and had thus moved them by an appeal, not to Beauty, but to mere Realism, would have banished, if not slain, the inventor of the cinema.

“ Generally speaking, every thinking man when he leaves these halls of darkness must blush for his species.

“ Note that what I have been saying has no reference to the films which record facts and events, no reference to ‘documentary’ films. They are excellent supplements to the newspapers, excellent auxiliaries to scientific study.

“ But we all know that this is not what the cinema really stands for. It claims to give material expression to the drama of life. It pits itself against the theatre and the novel. Films are like children’s illustrated story-books, but picture-books robbed of their beauty and appealing to the lowest type of human emotions.

The cinema claims to be Art, whereas it is, in fact, the negation of Art. That is the cardinal point."

Then, after a silence during which France stood gazing with his large eyes at the spectacle presented by the street and the passers-by, he began again, speaking quickly and in the nasal tone which always meant that he had something of great importance to say :

"Don't you think it is significant that this wave of universal cretinization comes to us from America ?

"I saw these Americans during the war, at Tours, where they descended like manna—or locusts. Every Sunday, the wind blew quite a number of our preservers up to La Béchellerie. Well, all I will say about them is that they are made differently from ourselves. God has compounded them of patent, up-to-date materials and welded them together with a stiffer cement than He used for the old European Adam. They are all health and machinery, and fitted with metal springs.

They are good calculators, but poor thinkers. Their brains are admirable cash-registers, but their values are different from ours. They look at things, they investigate, and make certain guttural noises called forth by events as they occur. In all other respects, they are like children. The art of conversation, the refinements of taste, a feeling for the *nuances*, a sensitiveness to the finer shades, these are evidently things that Columbus did not carry with him across the Atlantic. They have none of our failings, our cherished failings, and that is precisely why we cannot see ourselves in them. There is just a little something the Americans lack—a Past. They've no Past. That leaves their hands wonderfully free ; it's an asset to them in all the material things of life, it facilitates their progress. For you have, no doubt, observed that progress must begin with a clean sweep. Such things as Tradition and a Past appear to get in its way. The Americans are great inventors, great creators of material comfort, wonderful

builders, but of what we call culture, refinement, what Pascal called '*l'esprit de finesse*,' I find few traces among them.

"And having no tradition, no roots in the past, they can hardly be said to have an ideal."

"Nevertheless, Monsieur France," I said, "the greatest idealist of the nineteenth century, Emerson, was an American. And I fancy that American poetry and American imaginative literature, with Poe and Hawthorne and Whitman among their great names, can hold their own with our own poetry and our imaginative literature."

"I could say something concerning the inability of the writers whom you name, and of whom I know little, to understand our European culture, and I could say something also concerning the Protestant and Puritanical flavour of Emerson's idealism. But this, perhaps, besides being rather captious criticism, would be talking of things I do not know much about. Anyhow, all this is really beside the

question. The Americans are distant descendants of the English, the Spaniards and the French. They have their hereditary influences, and it is not their great men that I want to haggle about at the moment. As for the idealism you quite justly ascribe to them, it is of the moral and spiritual order. But I am speaking here of the æsthetic ideal and of Beauty, by which culture is created and by slow degrees moulded into enduring form. In that it seems to me they are lacking.

“But what matters it? If the Americans have no past, let them rejoice. It is the price they pay for their reversion of the future. Their minds are like the minds of children and find pleasure in looking at the baby pictures of the cinematograph. They can take Mormonism seriously and pin their faith to the spiritualism of William James. Nevertheless, they have a mighty future before them, and it is precisely because they are childlike that the future will be theirs.

“They exalt their cinema actors to the

sky and treat them as never Homer, alas, nor Michael Angelo, nor Shakespeare, nor even Talma was treated. Their *naïveté* is charming. A credulous people like that, a people that love pretty pictures to look at, have the future before them. The Athenians of old believed Peisistratus when he showed them a statue in a chariot and told them it was Minerva in person. Yet they were the forefathers of the people that admired Plato and mocked at Saint Paul."

And offering me one of the caramels which we had been to buy at a special shop he knew about near the market-place, he took one himself, and then began again, as we made our way back to the car :

"The Gauls and the Germanic tribes, who were destined to create Europe, were likewise without tradition. But they possessed themselves of the tradition of Rome and it prospered exceedingly in their hands.

"The future is with America, especially as it is, in all likelihood, America that will dig


the grave of Europe. She is only at the beginning of her career. She may quite possibly eat us and thus we shall communicate to her the good that is within us. For mastication is even more a social rite than a religious one ; by mastication, I mean the process of eating one's god in order to appropriate his virtues. Rome performed this rite in regard to Greece, and, when it came to their turn, the barbarian tribes that devoured Rome in a banquet that was more like an orgy, likewise made themselves the heirs of Rome and reaped a thousandfold from their inheritance.

“ And now it will soon be Europe's turn to be eaten. It seems pretty ripe. Will it be the Americans who will ingest us, or will it be the Yellow Races ? Who can tell ? And what know I about it all ? And what is this insufferable mania that impels me to indulge in prophecies, even while I rail against the prophets ? All the same, believe me : However valuable the cinema may prove from the

documentary or scientific standpoint, its expansion, its vogue are signs of decadence and an outrage upon Beauty—Beauty, sad-hearted exile that fares ever farther and farther from our midst.”

THE DEATH OF LOVE

THE DEATH OF LOVE

“ COME here. We want you badly,” said Anatole France, reinforcing his words with a gesture of appeal.

The tall and debonair gynecologist, who was an assiduous habitué of Madame de C.'s saloon, drew near, in obedience to the summons. Very alert and very upright despite his grey hair and beard, he had a virile appearance and a cast of features that reminded one of the Italian *condottieri* one sees in the sculptures of Donatello and Verrochio. Studiously inclined, interested in Art and Letters, still far from indifferent to the fair sex with whom he had ever been a favourite, he was further endowed with conspicuous charm and ease of manner.

France was in an excellent frame of mind that day. He was seated on the sofa, talking at large, casting glances of admiration across the room upon all the good-looking women. Among them was Madame de B., a somewhat haughty and statuesque beauty, but certainly a beauty. Offering a somewhat marked contrast to her was her friend, Madame S., who had the rather chubby features and clear white skin of a schoolgirl. Her eyes were dark and big and about her whole countenance there was a look of innocent wonderment.

"Come," said Anatole France, when the doctor had approached, "we want you to reveal to us the whereabouts of the seat of love. You, who know such a lot about the human body—especially woman's body—all its recesses, all its mysteries, must certainly be able to tell us that."

"You think so, do you?" said the doctor, with a tantalizing smile.

"Ah! I beg your pardon, I made a mistake. That question, as I put it, should

have been addressed to a metaphysician. The seat of love could have none but a Platonic location. No, it is the seat of passion, of *volupté*, with all its attendant emotions, that we are asking you about. For a sensation must have a centre. Whence comes this thrill so agreeable to man? From the spinal cord?"

"Oh no! That's an old notion of Gall's. More likely from the brain, from some corner of the brain which we haven't yet been able to identify."

"Look here at this happy man, who hasn't even the itch to know the seat of his sensations!" exclaimed Anatole France. "For I would have you to know, P., that I look upon you as Fortune's favourite *par excellence*. If I were simpleton enough to envy anyone, it would be you I should envy."

"You flatter me, and yet I confess I don't exactly know why!" replied the doctor in his easy-going fashion.

"Well, now, doctoring pure and simple is a profession I never much cared about. It

would be repugnant to me going about into all sorts and conditions of places, visiting the senile, the gangrenous, the leprous, the eczematous. Eugh ! it would be horrible. But always to be in your own house, like you, to see an endless procession of pretty women file into your consulting-room and to know that they come with the express purpose of unveiling the most intimate of their mysteries, the little diminutive spot in which Nature has hidden the Infinite ! Oh, yours is a marvelous profession ! A fashionable ladies' doctor—why, there you have the modern equivalent of the Pacha with four tails, if I may so put it.”

“ Don't let your imagination run away with you, my dear France,” said P. “ If you only knew what surprising things these pretty bodies often reveal to a doctor's eyes ! You know, better than I can tell it you, the story of Raymond Lulle who turned monk because the woman he adored, the woman he longed for, showed him her breast all eaten up with cancer. We have things like that every day.

No, you ought to think yourselves lucky, you people, to whom woman only displays her splendid outward trappings."

"No matter : I should like to have your chance of peeping behind the scenes sometimes."

"You summed up the whole thing, my dear France, a few days ago, in that delightful story you unfolded in *l'Illustration* about the female penguin. The most disturbing element about a woman's body is the dress that conceals it."

"Evidently you know too much about love's lowly workshop and—shall I put it so ? —the kitchen in which the ambrosia of passion is distilled. However, it doesn't take away your appetite !"

"Even cooks must eat !" answered the doctor, with a smile.

"What I envy you," continued France, "is that you scan the soul as well as the body. To be at once the gallant doctor and the father confessor is an ideal profession. The

most intimate confidences, which are denied even to the *curé*, nowadays, are entrusted to your ear. What a piece of luck for a novelist to collaborate with you ! A novelist such as B., for example, who specializes in love, would find in you an inexhaustible mine of information."

" But it is you, my dear France, you yourself who are *par excellence* the novelist of love."

" Come now ! You know perfectly well that that is not the case. I have certainly made a few small attempts to analyse love and, in the very process, I have robbed it of its bloom. No, for the real connoisseur in affairs of the heart, you must go to some one like George Sand, who does not analyse love but deifies it, and so obscures passion and drapes it with a veil. I have said it, and I maintain it still : she and Balzac have expressed the essential things in man, and they are, hunger and love.

" Balzac flung himself into the task of describing the stomach and the lusts thereof, and next the crooked fingers of the miser, for

ever greedy of clutch. Sand, by way of contrast, shows us man 'beside himself,' that is to say, set free from himself by passion. She paints the lover, for ever thirsting to taste, between the pressure of two eternities, the sublime oblivion of a kiss, to enjoy, within a woman's arms, a fleeting moment of illusion, to endure the agony of longing, like Rachel, refusing to be comforted. For the voluptuous charm of passion is that it seems vague and unfathomable, luring us with the spell of the infinite, unplumbed abyss.

"Nevertheless, we may as well confess it to this charming lady who is making her way towards us : Love is dead."

And, having duly kissed the hand of Madame J. who, tall, dark and gracious of mien, had just entered the room, France said again :

"Yes, Madame, Love is dead !"

"Love," he went on, turning to us, "is the child of Ignorance, since it proceeds from illusion. It is chiefly found in simple, naïve

periods, such as the age of Chivalry. But if you would escape it, you must grasp it firmly, analyse it, and so do it to death. Marcus Aurelius, to calm the promptings of his flesh and to console himself for the infidelities of Faustine, was in the habit of telling himself that love is but the mingling of two secretions, the contact of two epidermises, as a later expression more decently described it.

“ But it was the nineteenth century that played a large part in killing Love. Science put it to flight ; our learned men stripped it bare and displayed it to us in all its naked wretchedness, in all its nullity. We know too much, nowadays, to be lovers any more. We have become positivists. We have lost our faith. Love derived great support from religion, especially from Christianity, which paid it the extravagant compliment of exalting it to the rank of a mortal sin, and threatening it with all the terrors of hell-fire.”

Then, deeply pondering, he lifted his hands with an air of resignation, saying :

“The scalpel, alas, is fatal to life, my dear P. And knowledge disperses every aureole of glory. Just touch it with your finger-tip, and your beautiful ideal crumbles into dust.

“How essentially true of love, of every passion, is the story of Psyche. Wagner’s *Lohengrin* is merely a variation of it. As soon as Psyche lit the torch of knowledge, Love took flight, to return no more.

“And we, too, have brought the light of Psyche’s torch to shine too brightly on the winged boy, and so he has flown away.”

And then another simile occurred to him :
“Love is like Christ, who said to the Magdalen, ‘Touch me not.’ Love knows that whoso essays to grasp him, will lose him. Every illusion vanishes at a touch. We, too, have laid over heavy hands on every mystery and thus we have prepared for ourselves an endless disillusion. We know now that Love—from the philosophical point of view—is a trick of Nature whereby she compels us to reproduce

our species—from the physical point of view, an irritation of certain cells—from the psychological point of view, an aberration of the mind, a monomania, the obsession of the mind by an image—and finally, from the sociological point of view, a necessity. We know all that, and puffed-up with our science, we have lost the art of love. We have discovered that all is vanity, all illusion ; and ever since then, we have found life a mortal weariness to the flesh.”

“ Let us,” I said, “ console ourselves with the thought that, things being as they are, we suffer less.”

“ It is true, we suffer less from love, and I deplore it. I never forget those fine lines which Byron puts into the mouth of one of his heroes, making him say that a god would be wretched in his place, since a god could not suffer or die for the woman he loved.”

GOOD-BYE TO LAUGHTER

GOOD-BYE TO LAUGHTER



NE Thursday, after luncheon, at the Avenue Hoche, we had gone upstairs as usual to have our coffee in the little *salon*. The only guest, besides ourselves, was a Greek lady, a famous beauty whose portrait had been painted by Lembach, and who had married a man of title, an Indian governor. Later on, two more callers, a young poet and a member of the editorial staff of the *Figaro*, arrived on the scene.

Out of range of feminine ears, France was narrating, or rather repeating, a somewhat broad Arabian story which he was always fond of retailing to a suitable audience—a story he had got from the translator of the *Arabian Nights*. After this, the editor of the *Figaro*

proceeded to relate a Parisian anecdote, saying by way of preface :

“ I am going to make you laugh, *mon cher maître*.”

“ I doubt it,” said France, in whom these words suggested a train of thought which he seemed eager to develop there and then.

The journalist stopped short, and looked a little taken aback.

“ Have you noticed,” continued France, “ that it is always the unexpected that makes us laugh ? We must be taken unawares, if we are to let ourselves go. As long as we have the unknown in front of us, just so long we have a chance of being seized by the spasm to which we give the name of laughter. Alas, there is little that I have not experienced, and that is why I often smile, but seldom laugh.”

The journalist told his story, and France did his best to appear amused. And then, as his listeners were waiting in silence, and the ladies were about to join us, he said :

“ In these days, we analyse laughter ; we

seek to explain its causes, but we indulge in it less and less. Children excepted, there is little gaiety among us to-day. It's because we are well-off."

"What do you mean, Monsieur?" asked Madame de C. to encourage the conversation rather than to obtain information.

"I mean that we are all uniformly comfortable, and consequently all at the same dead level of contentment. Rarely looking for anything out of the ordinary to happen, with the future, if not assured, at all events settled, we no longer experience those sudden vicissitudes which plunge us into great joy or great sorrow. We are of a melancholy turn of mind, as is generally the case with civilized folk.

"When suffering was great and poverty widespread, the sound of laughter was loud in the land and gaiety held high festival. And laughter would flow from little or nothing, so fresh and naïve were our minds in those days. Who would laugh now at Cuvier's farces, who would respond to Tabarin's wit, or find

anything to amuse him in Gros Guillaume? The Middle Age, with its famines, its plagues and its wars, and later on, the sixteenth century with its religious conflicts—in those times when man had many ills to bear, he would often leap to the other extreme and laugh immoderately.”

“But thank God, we can laugh still!” protested Madame de C.

“Oh, I allow there are still some laughers left! They are, for the most part, humble folk, artisans, people who toil and struggle. In the poorer districts and in the villages, you may still hear those divine peals, those great explosions which used to shake the home of Olympian Jove himself. Our side of the Etoile is a great deal quieter, and it’s only the sound of a burst motor tyre that awakens the echoes there.

“Luxury brings sadness in its train. Luxury produces a temperament akin to Hamlet’s—the moonstruck, melancholy temperament of people who have no material anxieties, and who, because they are for ever eating and over-eating, are afflicted with a bilious outlook

upon life. Yes, luxury makes us sad, but knowledge makes us sadder still.

“ We know too much to be able to laugh. Aye, but it is true ! The laugh is the flower of *naïveté*, and the comrade of courage. But, our *naïveté* is gone ; we laugh no more, and since we laugh no more, we are losing, or are on the point of losing, that aerial lightness, that virginal grace of soul which we find so touching in the poets and the artists of those barbarous times, when life was more precarious than it is to-day,—those times we call the Middle Ages.

“ Models of wisdom, gravity and prudence, how can we be gay ? We don't risk our lives by going off to the Crusades, nor do we risk them when we merely put our noses out of doors, as our ancestors did. Thus we cannot know those sudden reliefs of the spirit, those sudden revulsions that made our fathers laugh so gaily.”

“ At all events, there are still the children,” said the journalist whose story had rather missed fire.

“ Ah, yes ! Children laugh, I grant you, and laugh their fill. I was saying that I don’t laugh much now unless from some nervous excitement. But I played off many jokes and laughed my bellyful in days gone by. Why, the quays used to resound with my laughter. Yes, I laughed properly in those days, with a laughter that came from the heart, spontaneous laughter, the laughter that heals and gives you wings. I remember how, one day, out on the boulevard, I pinned a rattle on to the great coat of my friend C., who was my butt. He afterwards became a paleographer which, as everybody will admit, is a melancholy profession. Heavens, what shouts of laughter made the welkin ring that day ! Why, when I was a schoolboy, the mere sight of my master’s wig—the wig of the Abbé Lalanne, most excellent of men—was enough to send me off into fits of laughter. Alas, those days of childhood and adolescence passed ; those divine twin sisters, the only joyous ones, whose names are Health and Liberty, have bid me

adieu. They have gone to embrace other madmen than me ; and now it's all over. I am grown thoughtful, I am given to meditation, and that is always sad. At the very best, I only smile when something amuses me. The childhood of man, the childhood of the race, those are the true clients of Laughter, the only ones that inspire him with sufficient confidence to court their company. He is a shy, mistrustful and capricious child, is Laughter. He turns his back on aged civilizations, on aged folk. However, if we no longer laugh much, neither are we very deeply moved. Farce • has forsaken us, but she has taken Tragedy along with her. We are left with the middling emotions : Light Comedy and the Melodrama."

Then, after a moment's pause, he added :

" However, I must confess that the god-like verve of Rabelais still makes me laugh. But I think that is because Rabelais reminds me of times long past, of joyous days, that are now no more."

THE DRAWBACKS OF PROGRESS

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ONE afternoon in July 1919, in the back room of the little haberdasher's, where he had arranged to meet me, France discoursed on the drawbacks of progress.

The little room in question was on the lower groundfloor ; it was a sort of storeroom which you reached by a dark staircase. The furniture consisted of a plain deal table and an easy-chair. It was there that the author of *Thaïs*, who was fond of humble folk and who went among them more freely since his marriage, took refuge when he came down from La Béchellerie to spend a few hours in Tours.

He began by summing up the conversation of the day before, and talked about the writers of the younger school. His observations were

not flattering, but they were free from irony. After that, by a natural transition, he fell to deploring the general decline of taste and culture.

The proprietor of the shop came in ; the Master addressed a few complimentary greetings to him and then went on expounding his ideas.

“ We ought not to rail against progress. Who would dare to do so ? Certainly not I, in any case, for I am in love with the light, even when its rays destroy. Nevertheless, I recognize that the misgivings entertained by Monsieur Renan in regard to the younger generations were not altogether unfounded. The author of *The Life of Jesus* held that ignorance, progressive and redoubtable, was menacing the future of the world. He said it when his life was drawing to a close ; and I used to suspect that he envisaged the probability that a general degeneracy would bring about the extinction of our civilization. He exaggerated ; and I, too, am perhaps inclined

to exaggerate. Nevertheless, we cannot help recognizing this most disquieting process of standardization, of levelling, for which the steam-roller of progress is responsible. Progress, particularly our brand of it, in which the practical side of life so overwhelmingly predominates, is not without its drawbacks. We shall adapt ourselves to it ; we are adapting ourselves to it, but only at the cost of considerable sacrifice.

“ Material progress. What does that signify in the last resort ? It means a universal levelling, a removal of the need for effort, and for that very reason—mark well my words—a loss of individuality. You cannot build powerful engines without paying the *quid pro quo*. They crush the life out of you in the end.

“ When the philosophers of the future come to take stock of our times, they will note—with or without surprise—with surprise, if they are short-sighted, without surprise if they know the ins and outs of human nature—that the

various departments of progress during the nineteenth century, which were of the mechanical and scientific order, had a tendency to brutalize us ; and, if they have not debased, have, at all events, vulgarized the intellectual level.

“ We have seen the triumph of the Press, the triumph of electricity ; but we have also witnessed the comparative decline of liberal education. We neglect the humanities ; we devote our energies to the making of machines much rather than to the making of individuals.

“ Yes, it is so. Look well around you and observe the drawbacks of progress. Note, to begin with, how the noxious germs develop apace. Time was when the seeds of crime matured obscurely, out of the general view. Now they come forth and flaunt themselves in the open and contaminate every mind that offers a favourable soil for the culture of vice—and God knows there are plenty of them. Political corruption, financial swindling, highway robbery, glaring crimes are heard of

everywhere. The news of them flies like wild-fire and performs its work of perversion with the rapidity of lightning, or, let me say, with the swiftness of the telegraph; that is, three hundred thousand miles a second.

“While the war was on, the Censor thought it incumbent upon him to purify the moral atmosphere a little so far as scandals of a military or political nature were concerned. He was solicitous for our nerves. Now that solicitude has come to an end, thanks to the Press, which, if it had taken a higher and more disinterested view of its functions, might have played the beneficent and ennobling rôle of a second Church. But it thinks more of circulation than of conscience, and has attuned its appeal to the lower elements in our national life, with the result that stupid ideas and corrupt deeds pullulate like microbes in an incubator.

“The down-at-heels flaunt it cheek by jowl with the millionaires on the third page of our newspapers, and that is the stuff the dreams of our fellow-citizens are made of.

Themistocles was wont to say that the laurels of Miltiades prevented him from sleeping. In those days it was high courage, glory, that stirred men's envy and jealousy. Nowadays milliners and little clerks' wives are prevented from sleeping by thinking about lucky speculators and actresses who marry noblemen ; and the tawdry, gutter-press halo of celebrity is the cynosure of all eyes.

“ But what seems least likely of all to revive is respect for our leaders. The foundations on which the ancient State reposed were prestige and authority. The leaders of the State, the mighty poets and philosophers, were regarded as Olympians. Dante was pointed out as one who had, in very truth, come back from the Underworld ; and folk would clamour to be touched by the Lord's anointed at Saint Denis in order to be cured of scrofula. My friend Pierre Laffitte, the positivist, used to say that fetishism was at the bottom of all hero-worship. For by universal consent, statesmen, politicians, great poets, no less than

great pontiffs, must be fetishes. In reality, their mode of life does not differ materially from our own. There are tares amongst them as there are amongst us. They, too, have their miseries, their weaknesses, their absurdities. But we must never know about such things. We must see their brows encircled with a halo. We must believe in them, for we must have something to believe in.

“But now that has become impossible. People scramble to read the tittle-tattle that appears in print about public men. They are brought before us in unflattering or undignified attitudes. I remember quite well how, when *Cyrano* was all the rage, I read in some newspaper or other that the young man who had written it was rather bald. Caricatures of Republican Presidents, or the Pope, the shortcomings of the great, scandals in the lives of public men, all these things are flashed round the world without an instant's delay. To hold the great up to ridicule, to bring them down from their pedestal, such is the grand

entertainment which the Press offers to the public.

“ Hero-worship is the basis on which strong, moral and enduring societies are founded ; but there is no hero-worship where there is too much gossip, where tittle-tattle and scandal-mongering have unlimited free-play.

“ Lack of respect, that is the watchword of present-day society. Next to that we have the contemptuous neglect of real culture and the substitution of a superficial and spurious veneer.

“ Before the era of our great mechanical inventions, when means of communication were both difficult and rare, men limited themselves to saying what was strictly necessary and no more. There were the learned and the unlearned. But now, distance has been abolished, everything has been levelled down and filed away, and smoothed out, and we assail each other's ears with an endless succession of aimless banalities. We must have a smattering of everything, with the result that we have no real knowledge of anything.

Just as the cinema has replaced the stage, the newspaper has ousted serious study. Racine has given place to Pathé, the *Petit Parisien* and *Lectures pour tous* are offered us instead of Montaigne and Voltaire ; and although as yet we have not been favoured with an electric woman constructed by Edison—the sort of thing Villiers de l'Isle Adam imagined—we can, at least, boast that for the Nine Divine Muses we have invented mechanical substitutes.”

He rose, put his soft felt hat carelessly on his head, took leave of his friend the haberdasher, spoke a few honeyed words, accompanied by admiring glances, to the shop assistant who was young and fresh-complexioned, and then took my arm and went downstairs.

“Make no mistake about it,” he went on, as he got into his red car. “We are slaves to the puppets of progress which we ourselves have created. Like Goethe’s apprentice-wizard, we don’t know the words of the charm

to stop the dance we have set in motion. Puffed up with pride over our civilization—our civilization that knows no gods, has no fetish and no soul, and which has not added a single essential truth to the civilizations it has replaced—we go on our way, ignorant and vain, towards a future in which respect, order, honour have no place.

“ Yes, Flammarion foretold that the world would die of cold ; and Sully-Prudhomme, the chaste Sully, beheld it sinking to its doom amid a riot of pleasures.

“ But I can see ignorant frivolity, blatant vanity extinguishing the light of Europe, as they extinguished the light of Greece and Rome. But, who can tell ? Perhaps some miracle, some magnificent misfortune, some saving disaster, will come and renew the strength of Europe. For you know that the plagues of Egypt arouse the sleepers from their sleep and renew their failing powers.”

“ And then,” said I, “ there is Bolshevism ! ”

“ Ah yes ! ” he replied. “ That’s true, there’s Bolshevism ! ”

He looked at me with eyes more wide open than usual, and relapsed into silence. Then he began to talk about his beloved patient, whose condition at that time was causing him anxiety.

THE LURE OF SPIRITUALISM

THE LURE OF SPIRITUALISM



ONE morning—it was some considerable time after the death of Madame de C.—France was eloquently holding forth, in his downstairs *salon*, on the subject of Illusion. It was a favourite theme of his, and it admitted of endless variations.

Among the company was a lady still in her youth and possessed of a strangely beautiful and expressive face. Her complexion was pale and her eyes lit up with little golden gleams. She came, I fancy, from the land of the Natchez and the Choctaws. Over Anatole France, she had cast a spell, and I frequently met her at his house.

She had been talking about a certain learned scientist who had been egregiously

fooled by a company of spiritualists and mediums. The affair was causing quite a sensation, and not a little amusement.

“I know,” said France, who had refrained from joining in the general merriment, “I know how it is that these eminent scientists are so easily bamboozled by spiritualism. It is because they are more cramped than we are in the real world. They have explored it in every direction, weighed, measured and analysed it, and consequently they know how small it is. For, in truth, it is a little thing, this universe.”

“And yet it is immense,” answered one of the company.

“No, my friend, it is not immense. A brain, weighing two pounds, can contain the whole of it. You can encircle it in no time, and when you’ve done it, you are oppressed by a horrible sensation of monotony. You feel suffocated, because there is nothing but this real, known, tangible world about you.

“And it is precisely because they want to

escape from the everyday world, to plunge into the land of dreams, to elude the known and familiar reality, that table-turning and spirit-rapping are so popular with humanity ; that is why they are so irresistibly attractive."

"Unfortunately, one must be a fool to believe in them," said I.

"There is no stupidity in being imaginative. . When you come to sum it up, the *intelligentsia* consists of people who are incapable of invention. And, after all, why should I mind being taxed with stupidity if, at that price, I were allowed the ineffable joy of conversing with the geniuses and the beautiful women of the Past ; to inhale the perfume of Cleopatra's shoulders, to caress the tresses of Queen Berenice, those lovely golden tresses which we can now only see by night when, nose in air, we squint through a telescope ?

"Alas ! You can't touch the hair of the fairies or caress the shoulders of disembodied spirits.

"And yet Paracelsus, the Abbé de Villars,

and even, it would seem, Leonardo da Vinci, have enjoyed carnal dalliance with non-human creatures, not to mention Crookes, that fortunate rascal who, for whole weeks on end, held converse with a young woman from another world. Certainly Crookes had some luck in his day. He first of all performed a miracle in the natural order. He split the atom and discovered new metals, new rays, and Heaven knows what besides. He weighed the imponderable, and glimpsed the invisible. But what is all that beside his experiences with Kate King, the familiar spirit who used to come and keep him company, who nestled at his feet, who gave him her hair to twine, who would take his hand and place it herself on her virgin bosom?

“What I envy him most of all, with his Kate King, was his experience of something which no mortal woman could vouchsafe us, to wit, Platonic love. Fairies alone can fulfil the conditions requisite to permit the enjoyment of that ethereal experience. In any other

company, the flesh is always there, with its bloom, its odour, its rounded contours, which obsess our senses and make it quite impossible for us to look on women as angels.

“ Ponder, then, on the ineffable delight of loving a woman platonically, without undergoing the preliminary necessity of being too infirm for anything else ! ”

“ You would rather have us immaterial ? ” asked the American lady, with a smile that displayed her dainty teeth.

“ Heaven forbid ! No, I should lose too much ! Nevertheless, what a novel sensation it would be to enjoy the conversation of the angels, to hold commerce with the unpolluted spirits of the air, to dally with them as though with flowers or shooting stars. Crookes experienced all that and, I doubt not, was the happiest of men.”

“ But his familiar genius was a pure humbug. She was a little woman of flesh and blood who merely played a trick on the old scientist.”

“ Exactly, I know that. She fooled him. What I regret is that she didn’t fool me. Ah, everything fools us, my friend, the sky, the hues of dawn, the rainbow on a pigeon’s neck, the song of the nightingale. All we love is Illusion. Analyse our ideal, and lo, it turns to ashes ! Wherefore, let us never weary of saying with Jesus, ‘ Touch me not ! ’ Happiness, like the Ideal, like love, crumbles into dust beneath our fingers do we but touch it never so lightly. Reality is nought ; Imagination is all, and woe to him who would seek to find truth beyond the confines of his dreams.”

“ But then, *cher maître*, nothing is easier than to deceive one’s self, if one so desire.”

“ You think so ? ” said France, getting up and looking rather put out. “ Except love—and I need not except even that now—nothing can deceive me. I have not imagination enough. I, too, am one of the *intelligentsia*, hypnotized by the most deceitful, the most hoary, the most wrinkled and the most forbidding of all illusions—the illusion of

Truth. I look askance on the supernatural. Why, I wonder? I know not; but it is so. I examine, I ponder; mine are the crooked fingers of the sceptic who would analyse everything. The supernatural flees before me as it would from one guilty of sacrilege. I have often been present at spiritualistic séances and invoked the ghosts of the departed. They would have nought to do with me. And so I shall die in the belief that the invisible is non-existent. It was not given to me to see as far and as wide as the visionaries of this world. I am content to dream of the possibility of dreaming."

GOD AND THE STARS

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ONE evening the *salon* of Madame de C. was transformed, for the occasion, into a lecture-theatre and to an audience consisting of beautiful women-journalists, men of letters, and politicians, the Abbé M., a well-known figure in Society, to which he displayed a muscular and agile figure, a bold and determined countenance, discoursed about the wonders of the heavens.

It was an exceptionally brilliant and enjoyable evening. After the lecture, the audience, having come down to earth and being anxious to throw off the starry dizziness which had just a little wearied them, crowded eagerly into an adjoining room where champagne and pastries were awaiting them.

It was, I think, that evening that our ears were startled by a little cry of alarm and dismay from the charming wife of Monsieur C., the publisher. Her pearl necklace had fallen from her neck and the pearls lay scattered about the floor.

“Why trouble to pick them up?” said France, in a tranquil voice, addressing their fair owner. “It is when they are on your shoulders that pearls display their beauty and show us the wonders of the Milky Way. On the ground they have no value. Let them lie where they are.”

At last the flood of guests receded a little and France, who was a little out of humour, because by reason of the lecture he had not been able to say a word the whole evening, sat down on a sofa near the windows and saw with satisfaction a group of listeners—men and women—form themselves in a circle round about him.

“He speaks well, the Abbé M.,” said he. “And he knows. Oh yes, he knows. He

knows, for example, that the alleged canals in Mars probably exist only in the imagination of Signor Schiaparelli. For astronomers are visionaries, too, dreamers on the grand scale. They juggle with the Infinite.

“For my part, I must confess it makes me feel a little odd when I hear an abbé declaring that Sirius is a million times bigger than the Sun, and affirming, in cassock and bands, that the Earth and Mars have been revolving for millions of centuries round the globule of fire which gives us light. Yes, it sounds strange in my ears. Yet I must not complain, since, after all, I had the good fortune to encounter, in my childhood, an abbé-astronomer after my own heart, a veritable scholar-priest who duly put his knowledge at the service of his sacred calling, that is to say, fanatically.

“Among the many fantastic figures that dance in the auroral light of my youthful recollections, I recall a number of ecclesiastics who, for divers reasons, made a deep impression upon me. They had, all of them, been hewn

and fashioned by Nature and Time, in a manner that rendered them unforgettable. To begin with, there was my professor at the Stanislas, the Abbé Lalanne, whose name often rises to my lips ; and then there was the Abbé Trévoux whom I encountered later on, a little fat, pursy man, with his three-cornered hat stuck on all awry, and his clerical *soutane* all bulging with books, who used to toddle along the banks of the Seine, fishing for Breton saints. He was wont to catch them in the boxes of the second-hand booksellers. He was for ever writing the history of their lives and helped them, I cannot help thinking, to multiply the number of their miracles. The wealth of information he contrived to amass about the Saints of Brittany in his walks along the riverside, no one would ever believe. I used to see him, every day that God made, waddling along, sneezing out the snuff which he shovelled into his nostrils, and bending beneath the weight of the pamphlets he had thrust into his pockets.

“He was a kind and gentle soul was the Abbé Trévoux. I looked on him in the light of a phenomenon. Once I put some questions to him concerning Paradise, without, however, obtaining any very noteworthy information.

“The other cleric, who presents himself still more vividly to my memory than the Abbé Trévoux, was a tall, dark ecclesiastic, just as pale as the other was rosy, just as tall and austere as the other was podgy and smiling. He also took his walks along the quays, but he never ransacked the second-hand boxes to see if any saints had strayed in there by mistake. He kept his eyes on the horizon and his thoughts within his own bosom. A happier man than we, he looked and saw—nothing!

“He was called the Abbé Matalène, and had written a book in which he proved that the stars revolve round the Earth and that we, as is seemly and right, and as we had at first believed, were the centre and hub of the Universe. That was what he said, and being

skilled in mathematics, he proved it. For you may prove whatever you like with figures, no less than with words. Less generous than Anaxagoras, who held that the Sun was equal in size to the Peloponnesus, the Abbé Matalène, in the year of grace 1850, would not admit that it was any bigger than it actually appears to the eye. That was rather niggardly. I remember that one broiling July day, my father, who was in his shop, said to him, as he mopped the sweat off his brow : ‘ The Devil himself and all his furnaces must live in that little bit of a Sun of yours, Monsieur l’Abbé, seeing that, despite its narrow dimensions, it can pour down all this heat upon us.’ ”

France was silent for a few moments. Then, as he saw Madame D. advancing towards him with her hazel eyes and golden hair, he said, with a glance full of admiration for her beauty :

“ Are you aware, Madame, that one of the stars in the Arctic Circle is very old and like to die ? Shall I succeed in stirring your

emotion when I tell you that we are bound straight for the Constellation of Hercules? Aye, Madame, that is our destination. We are going to the Constellation of Hercules. That's what we are doing, while infants are born and aged folk are a-dying, while new religions are rising and old ones falling to ruin, we are speeding, and all the planetary bodies, with the Sun at their head, are speeding, in headlong career, towards the Constellation of Hercules. That is your trysting-place, Madame, your goal and ours. 'Tis there we shall arrive when, after æons yet to be shall have passed away; when our dust shall have disappeared, when the Earth is shattered to fragments and the light of the Sun extinguished. Thither we shall come, and wherefore? We know not, but thither we are travelling; and travelling at a speed of tens of thousands of miles to the second."

And glancing sadly at the pretty lady, he said :

" No matter ! Be seated all the same, and

suffer me to kiss your hand before we reach this mysterious destination."

Then turning to me, he said :

"Women have no feeling for astronomy. I am not directing that remark at you, Madame. I am speaking generally. Women do not interest themselves in astronomy, and the fact is significant. It shows that astronomy goes against our instincts, that it is inimical to our tranquillity, to our littleness, in short, anti-human because immeasurable.

"All these stars of infinite dimensions, describing orbits of monstrous immensity, which when taken all together do but form a nebula, the only one visible to us, reduce the Earth, our Earth, our Universe, our Pride, to a drop of mud warmed by a spark of fire. It is but too true. The universe of Saint Thomas Aquinas, where everything was ordered on a human scale, in which the sky was a piece of tapestry nailed up with golden nails, and where our only neighbours were the Damned and the Elect, the former suffering, the latter

rejoicing—and so, both alike, our brothers—was better suited to our nature, and, on the whole, not less real than the universe of the gentleman to whom we have just listened.”

• We all protested.

“Are you so sure that the Abbé Matalène is wrong and Galileo right? Nevertheless, I would have you observe that certain modern scientists do not look upon the motions of the earth as beyond controversy since, it appears, they are incapable of demonstration, and that for reasons of a mathematical order. I, who do not possess their knowledge, have my doubts for a different reason. I believe, generally speaking, that every piece of knowledge acquired by man is but a further step forward in a land of make-believe and fantasy. What we call astronomy and geometry is the science of space and time. Now, time and space are illusions of the human mind; they are, moreover, shifting and doubtful illusions, and our ideas concerning them undergo incessant change. What quicksands are these whereon

we stand, and how hazardous and how pathetic the efforts we make to find some stable foothold in this bewildering scene of ever-changing phenomena.

“ Nay, but the gravamen of my complaint against astronomy is that, while it fills our hearts with fear, it affords us no foundation whereon to rear a fresh illusion, a new religion. For it is true, that sciences often provide us with the elements of our religions. All the cults which, one after another, have been professed by man are founded on the scrap-heap of discarded science—old-fashioned systems or theories of therapeutics, astronomy or meteorology. The gods we worship are but the drifting wrack of winds, and meteors and stars.

“ But our modern astronomy, with its high-sounding phrasology, can only offer us, by way of religion, the sort of thing it has given to Flammarion—the hope that after death we shall become inter-planetary commercial travellers, and that we shall fly like

slow yet bustling sparrows from Vega to Aldebaran, though we shall never, alas, change our nature, nor our object, since whatever we find on the other planets will have been already known to us on this ; and we all know what that is worth !

“ No, the Infinite is within us, and it is the only Infinite we know. As for the Infinite without, we would fain have it lit with a single star, the beacon-star of Hope ; but that star shines not, it is marked no longer on the chart of our astronomers.”

And now the guests began to disperse, and Madame, her duties as hostess having ceased to claim her, came and took her seat beside us, and turned her big, wondering eyes upon the speaker.

“ Yes,” he said again, “ the Infinite is within us and it changes not. In the days of my childhood, the Universe extended from the grass-grown slopes of the Trocadéro to the Pont d’Austerlitz. It seemed to me a land of untold marvels, which I should never finish

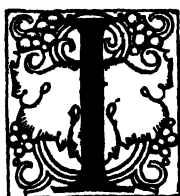
exploring. And, indeed, it was inexhaustible, since, as I changed, it changed also. The Universe is not a whit more wonderful, nor am I a whit more satisfied, now that it stretches, illimitable, to the confines of the Milky Way.

“What I expected the Abbé M. to tell us to-night was whether or not there was a lamp-lighter up aloft ; whether some one passes along amid the fantastic splendours of the celestial realms, now to illumine and anon to extinguish the stars.

“I was telling Madame D. just now that one of the stars of the Arctic Circle is on the point of death ; but it did not interest her. I wager it would have surprised her, and me too, if the Abbé had suddenly told us that Some one was watching by the bedside of the dying one. Now, the Abbé is not merely an astronomer ; he is a priest. So if he makes no mention of it, we may take it, alas, that there is no one there ! ”

UNDER THE ROSE

UNDER THE ROSE



HAVE a particularly vivid recollection of one of the last occasions on which I saw Anatole France. The talk I had with him, that day, lives in my memory, and I cannot record it without feelings of emotion. His own delightful discourse was marked by a sort of aerial grace, a lightness and an elegance most appropriate to his genius.

It was on a Thursday, and I had gone to the Villa Saïd in the late afternoon. Madame was out, and Anatole France came down alone to greet me, and took me into the drawing-room. On the table was a pile of new publications, as yet unopened and still in their wrappers, but behind the big armchair was the

bookcase full of old books, the only ones he consulted, the only ones he really loved.

Some time later, there arrived a member of Calmann-Levy's staff who had known France in all the successive stages of his progress to fame. Simple and open-hearted, he had all the qualities which France looked for in a friend, and he came to ask him to inscribe a couple of books, to sign some document, and, finally, to write a letter of recommendation to the editor of the *Figaro*. But we had already had time to talk. And France, happening to be in one of those moods of unclouded vivacity which occurred at ever rarer and rarer intervals in the gentle but progressive decline of the last two years, was extraordinarily brilliant, enchanting me with a rainbow vision of delicate and ever-changing hues—for such, at its best, his conversation was wont to be.

I asked him what work he was engaged on at the moment.

“Some time ago,” he said, “I began, but

put aside, a sort of philosophic dialogue of which God was the theme. I intended publishing a book of dialogues, a series of reflections on the great problems of life. The book would have been, in a way, a sequel to *Little Pierre* and *The Bloom of Life*, since it would have been the outcome, the flower, of my life-long meditations. At any rate, the title is there, and a good one it is. I was going to call the book *Under the Rose*.

“ ‘Under the rose !’ To begin with, the usual connotation of the phrase is pleasing to me because it is appropriate to dialogues in which the prevailing note is disillusionment. It consists, in point of fact, of talks between people of advanced views, people holding ideas which it might be as well not to publish wholesale, not to profess otherwise than *sub rosa*. But to-day, ‘under the rose’ has for us—at least it has for me—a wider significance. It is tinged and perfumed with a floral essence. It seems to me fittingly to designate the only moment when the life of man, that drab and

dolorous experience, takes on an airy charm, a flowery grace ; I mean the moment when, after a choice repast, he may enjoy the charm of converse, the eager interplay of thought with thought, in the company of cultured and enlightened friends.

“ Did not the ancients crown themselves with roses when the time came to converse and hold communion with their fellows ? They felt it was a festival, a royal boon, to break down the partitions of isolation after they had broken bread, and so to hold communion with each other in the light of those flashes of understanding which the ever-shifting scene of passions and events calls forth from the brain of man.”

I answered that what the phrase “ under the rose ” especially called up to my mind was a vision of old Anacreon of Teos, with a coronal on his head, conversing with Sappho and Alcæus.

“ You are like me,” answered France.
“ You will not submit to be confined within

the strait jacket of chronology. In accordance with tradition, which, regardless of mere dates, aims only at artistic juxtapositions, you conjure up the picture of Sappho, on fire with love, and the genial singer of the wine-cup holding converse together. In point of fact, they were not exactly contemporaries.

“To discourse at our ease, ‘under the rose,’” he went on, “calling up poetical fancies by which we are fain to illumine the pilgrim-way of life, endeavouring also firmly to capture and make fast the vague and fleeting notions which the material world awakens in the brain, what a noble occupation have we there, the only one whereby man differentiates himself from, and surpasses, all the other animals.”

Then, putting a friendly hand on my shoulder, he said :

“Well, I don’t know whether I shall have my book of dialogues *Under the Rose*. And after all, what good would it serve? All my work, my haphazard work, is but a long

series of talks. Fiction has always bored me, and certainly I do not excel in it. But to be moved by the beauty of things, to be filled with awe at their mystery ; to marvel at that extraordinary compendium of contradictions we call Man, a creature who would be ludicrous were he not perennially exalted and redeemed by suffering ; to discourse on the passions, to point out their vanity and the pleasant illusions which follow in their train ; to meditate on the past so that, haply, we may the more clearly discern the future—such have been the tasks which I have busied myself withal. I have had no plan ; I have observed no rule ; I have simply gone straight on, musing as a child might muse, never thinking whether or not I was doing anything important, pursuing my path, if not joyfully, at all events with a light heart, trying never to be dismayed at the sinister sights wherewith life essayed to daunt me.”

And being, on this occasion, particularly inclined to self-revelation—which was very

exceptional with him, for he usually hated talking about his art, or his books—he said :

“ Yes, I said somewhere or other, that my sole ambition was to set here and there a rustic seat in the sacred grove, near the fountains of the Muses, inviting the wayfarers to stay their steps, and showing them the points of vantage whence they might most profitably steal a glance at Beauty.

“ This rôle of the attentive and kindly Sylvanus suits me and always has suited me. I might also say that I have invited my contemporaries to take stock of the Tragi-Comedy of life—to observe it from a distance, seated round a table on a gentle eminence whence the course of events might be noted, and where their significance might be discussed in a dialogue.”

He paused for a moment, picked up, at random, one of the parcels on the table, opened the book which it contained, closed it again and replaced it on the table.

“ The dialogue,” he went on, “ is a noble

literary form and lends itself to the interchange of divers views. I wish I had made more direct use of it. It admits, it provokes controversy. It is adapted to the human intelligence, whose function it is to deliberate—that is, to choose between opposites. It was held in great repute at periods when the human intellect reached its height, in the days of Pericles and in the days of Lorenzo de Medici, and that is a proof of its excellence. The disputants contradict one another without heat, and by means of this instrument of contradiction, essay to carve out a theory which shall adapt itself to events and to the passions which produce them. Monsieur Renan once said that life itself is a lofty and unending dialogue carried on between Creation and the Creator.

“Then again, the dialogue partakes of the nature of prayer, since two poets, two philosophers, exchanging ideas, magnify creation thereby, and impart one to the other the joy of mutual understanding in a perfect

communion of spirit ; that is to say, in the highest form of love."

"Indeed," I answered, impressed by the charm of his discourse, "to exchange our thoughts, or our dreams, concerning the world about us, is one of the most delightful things that life can offer."

But here Anatole France stretched forth his hand with a gesture of boyish eagerness, and seizing me by the arm, gently restrained me.

"No, my friend, no," said he. "The finest thing life has to offer is not the interchange of ideas, but the reception of impressions, of pictures, to listen to the Voice of Nature speaking to your heart. The fairest portion of a man's life is his childhood : a time not of ideas or deliberation, but an unending revelation of new forms, new images. Then one is happy indeed. You are alone, but your solitude does not weigh upon you. You are alone in the presence of all the multitudinous phenomena which come to cast their

reflections in that magic mirror—the mind of a child. Ah, what days are those, before we find out the meaning of sorrow, of death ; before we make our sad acquaintanceship with the travail of the mind ; when the sun shines with a brighter radiance ; when there rests a glory on the earth, and all the world seems apparelled in celestial light. Then everything comes to us with the freshness of some magic revelation. All things are new, yet all are friendly and familiar. This happy age we may call the picture age. In the silent chambers of the mind, the magic scene unfolds itself before our eyes. Childhood, the rich giver of new things ; then fleeting adolescence which brings us the last and most wonderful of all new things, the gift of love. These things are the pearls strung on the chaplet of life. No dialogue enters there. No ; for me happiness is a monologue.

“ The dialogue is the offspring of thought ; it is born when we set forth on our quest for the thing we shall never find—the meaning of

life. Already the Sphinx, peering over the shoulder of Sorrow, is propounding the Riddle to which we shall find no key. And then, when we begin to reflect, we perceive that we are not alone ; we perceive that we are one among many who are bound upon the like pilgrimage ; and then it is we fall to talking with our fellows.

“To discourse ‘under the rose’ is one of the sweets of old age ; the comely and dignified occupation of one who knows that he is mortal and sees the shadows lengthening. The old singer of Teos, for whom the world has begun to lose its morning freshness, Socrates, importuned by the questionings of conscience—these are the guests who hold their dissertations ‘under the rose.’ Even Alcibiades, who makes his entry at the conclusion of the Symposium, is too young, and comes not to solve the riddle of Love, but to banish thought, and mar the gravity of the scene with merriment.

“Nevertheless,” he added, rising from his seat, “*Under the Rose* is a very fine title.”

Just then, his publisher friend returned to ask for the letter and the signatures.

France gave him a letter, signed a paper, inscribed two of the books, and then, with the stubborn, immovable obstinacy of a child, refused to inscribe the third.

“ Ah, no ! It’s too much of a good thing ! Let me alone for to-day.”

Then, a quarter of an hour later, he performed the task without a murmur.

That incident was typical of his whole life—a charming oscillation between little outbreaks of petulance and gentle, humorous resignation.

THE BLUNDERS OF GENIUS

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ONE morning, chancing to find Anatole France alone at the Villa Saïd, I jokingly told him about one of his stories in *L'Etui de Nacre*, in which, by inadvertence or error, the heroine is made to appear under a different name on almost every page.

“Why, it must read like utter nonsense !” exclaimed France, in horrified amazement. “And they’ve gone on printing it like that ? How idiotic !”

“I have not got the original edition.”

“Oh, well ! I’ll put it right ; I’ll put it right. I must make a note of it so as not to forget it. And you say it’s not merely once that the heroine changes her name ?”

“Two or three times.”

“I must have joined together some old fragments without taking proper care. You amaze me ! It’s frightful to perpetrate such idiotic blunders ! And no one noticed it ! I will correct it. I should like to correct everything. For example, take *The Red Lily* ; I set about revising the text a little while ago. On the very first page, I was held up by the description with which the story opens. It was incomprehensible, ill-written, cramped, awkward, pitiable stuff. I set to work to make French of it, or at least, I tried to do so. I rewrote the entire passage. Then I went on clipping and trimming every sentence, but I soon realized that to make a job of it, I should have to rewrite the whole book. So I gave it up, merely making, here and there, a few absolutely indispensable corrections. So that only the first two pages of *The Red Lily* can be regarded as correct.”

Then his thoughts again reverted to the error I had pointed out to him.

“ A character with a different name on every page ! Could carelessness any farther go ! ”

Anatole France appeared greatly distressed. Then a moment after, he was smiling.

“ Do you know, my friend, that you please me when you tell me that ? For when you come to think of it, it is only geniuses who suffer themselves to do such things. That does not apply to me ; yet this resemblance, wholly superficial and, so to speak, negative as it is, is nevertheless agreeable to my mind. Why, we have to go to Shakespeare and Cervantes for blunders on this scale. You remember that incredible slip of Cervantes when he makes Sancho mount his ass to go and look for that very same ass, which had gone astray. What say you to that ? As for Shakespeare, he is full of errors. There is a particularly striking one in *Macbeth*. Macbeth knows not where the witches are to be found when he is going to murder Duncan, but is quite well acquainted with their whereabouts when he is meditating

the murder of Macduff. This same Macbeth refers to a certain thane as a mighty chieftain, forgetting that he had already defeated him and made him prisoner.

“ So we may be of good cheer about these things. Masterpieces are, like life, full of inconsequences. Moreover, the blunders of genius are the joy of the scholiasts and the touchstone of the critics’ ingenuity. I was talking just now about *Macbeth*. Well, some critic constructed a most elaborate thesis to prove that crime communicated the science of evil to Macbeth, even as the apple communicated it to Eve. It was thus he got to know the address of the witches which, until he had steeped his hands in blood, was hidden from him.

“ The main, the essential thing, look you, is to create life. This Macbeth of Shakespeare, here, who forgets to-day what he had said the day before, is so full of life and energy that he makes us forget the Macbeth of history, that faint emanation of pallid truth, who was probably quite consistent and quite coherent.

“How beautiful it is !” he continued, after a moment’s silence ; “how beautiful is this power of genius which creates such characters as Macbeth and Don Quixote ! Think, my friend, what a faculty for escaping from the workaday world, what a capacity for illusion, for disincarnation, is needed for such a task as that.

“I often call to mind a story about Balzac, which I think is admirable. A friend came one day to tell him all about his family troubles and remarked, I think, how ill his sister was. Balzac listened with impatience, and at last interrupted him, saying :

“ ‘ Well, now, let us leave all that. Let’s get back to reality. Let’s talk about *Père Goriot*.’ For him, reality was imagination.

“The world is evil and we are its bondsmen. By creating, we set ourselves free of it. Balzac’s friend kept groping and stumbling amongst his troubles and disasters, while Balzac lived in a real world of his own creation, which he could fashion as it pleased him. That was his kingdom, and so in a manner he

became the master of his fate and disentangled himself from the web of circumstance.

“ And we may say that in this world, where miracles no longer happen, genius, albeit imperfectly, takes their place. •

“ I should prefer, without doubt, never to have lived. To be born is a disaster. But if it had been open to me to choose my lot, I should have chosen that of the dreamer who, like the hero in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, goes a-voyaging in the moon, thanks to the faculty of liberation, thanks to the ubiquity he owes to his imagination.

“ He, on whom the silent Muses with their gentle faces have laid their finger in his cradle, cannot be called unhappy. He may adjust the things that are awry ; he creates, side by side with the Creator. The power which for a moment love bestows on every one—the power to grasp the torch of life and to pass on its flame to another—genius vouchsafes in permanence to those on whom it looks with favouring eyes.

“Of the gifts of dreams, they have the lion’s share, and there is no lot more enviable here below.”

“Yes,” I said ; “it is true that writing is a pleasure.”

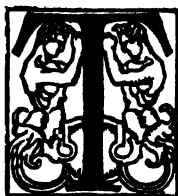
“Say rather, dreaming, imagining, conceiving. About writing I am not so sure. As for myself, I taste the delights of escape in meditation, but not in writing. Every time they bring me a pen and set a pile of paper in front of me, I feel like making for the door, or going up in a balloon, or jumping into a boat ; anyhow, getting away somewhere.”

“All the same, you used to say how fine an occupation it was to trace the ideal upon a sheet of paper.”

“Well, when all is said and done, such things are but phantoms. Were it not better to contemplate the broad river on which all things flow onward to the Great Beyond ? How can one write when, out in the world, there is the sunshine, and flowers, and women ? ”

NEW SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

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THE discussion had taken a literary turn that day. It was a Sunday, but the door of the Villa Saïd, thanks to the stricter vigilance of the new housekeeper—Joséphine being no longer there—did not open so readily to visitors.

It was the last time that I saw there a Danish lady with blue eyes—melancholy and expressive eyes—who came frequently to Paris and haunted the Villa Saïd. There was also, among the visitors, the publisher P. who was a particular friend of the Master's, and then some admirers whom he had met, I think, in Rome.

The conversation turned, for a long while, on Péguy, to whom France was very attached,

and then he began to talk of Bergson, whose vogue was then just beginning.

I suppose that, at that time at any rate, France had a somewhat hazy notion of what was meant by Bergsonism. He only spoke of it in vague and general terms ; yet some of his reflections about it were, in a sense, both true and apposite.

“ Here is a man,” said he, “ who, having been nourished on the food of the intellect, turns ungratefully, sacrilegiously, against his mother. He uses reason to serve his purpose, and then turns round and reviles it. He thinks that thinking is an evil. Now you will see that a philosophy of instinct and intuition will be followed by an instinctive æstheticism, by which, in the long run, religion will benefit.”

“ Why will religion benefit ? ” I inquired.

“ Because whatever is anti-intellectual is always favourable to religion. But never mind, so long as the new æstheticism brings forth fruit and inspires men to create. For it comes to this, that æsthetic systems, though

they resemble scientific and philosophical systems in the brevity of their duration, are, nevertheless, beyond all price, by reason of their marvellous power to renew the springs of the human imagination. It is from philosophic theories that great literary movements are born. It may be said that a philosophic theory, which is after all but a fiction, nevertheless transforms our vision of the universe. And if these systems of philosophy and æsthetics grow old, the works of imagination which they inspire and call forth remain for ever young."

And turning with a polite gesture towards the lady, he said :

" You remember, Madame, in what magnificent language Lucretius hails the advent of Epicureanism, and how he lauds that son of Greece who broke down the narrow confines of Nature and, having wandered over the fields of space, came back to reveal to man the laws of Nature and the secrets of the gods. I have not the Latin text at hand, and I

won't go upstairs for it now, but what beautiful lines they are ! And once upon a time I knew them by heart. But my memory begins to fail me."

Then turning again to us, he continued :

" We have witnessed, or at least I have, the unfolding of a similar event. Just as the doctrine of Epicurus fired men's imagination and inspired the poetry of the Augustan Age, so, in our own day, another doctrine set free men's souls and changed the whole character of their outlook on life. This doctrine, foreshadowed by Goethe, patiently elaborated by Lamarck and Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire, codified and set in order by Darwin, took Europe by storm.

" What a commotion it caused, and yet how brief was its supremacy ! I remember it all. We all put on the magic spectacles held out to us by the English wizard, and lo, on a sudden, the whole scheme of creation lay unfolded before us and we beheld order arising out of chaos. It was a new conception of life

that sprang from Darwin's teaching and, as usual, that conception inspired a new poetry, a new art, a new philosophy.

“Of course, it was all a little disturbing, and not very flattering to man ; but we managed to adapt ourselves to the new doctrine with considerable success. It humbled us immensely to know we were descended from the ape, but we derived a proud satisfaction from the reflection that, at some future date, we might become something more than men. What glorious seed to fling upon the field of imagination ! Renan, in his dialogues, made abundant use of it ; and, later on, Nietzsche, whom I cannot say I love, announced, on the authority of Darwin's teaching, the coming of his Superman. Then the novelists and dramatists must have a finger in the pie, Zola and Ibsen, who, taking the Darwinian theory of heredity as their text, modified or rebuilt the social fabric, and gave us a new system of ethics.

“The canons of taste, the whole tendency of art, underwent a complete change under the

influence of the new spirit. No province of human knowledge was unaffected by its influence. And, incidentally, there came about what always does come about in these cases. Materialistic as was its nature and origin, Darwinism became the servant of Idealism. Mankind, perceiving a design in creation, and definite evidences of progress all along the track of Time, fortified themselves with the doctrine of perfectibility and indulged the hope that they might, one day, be made equal with the gods.

“ But how quickly all that has passed away. Symbolism dawned upon the scene at a happy moment to give us a change from the scientific diet of which my generation had partaken to satiety, to repletion. Wearied with reality, humanity began to look for an ideal beyond the frontiers of reason, perhaps beyond the confines of common sense.”

I remarked that Bergsonism would, perhaps, sow the seed of a new system of æsthetics.

“ Yes,” he replied, “ provided that system

has a tincture of mysticism. In that case, it would have some chances of success among our young men to-day. They have not quite recovered from our scientific orgies. Their fathers ate of the bitter fruit of reality ; and it is their sons who have their teeth on edge at the thought of it. They offer us a touching spectacle, the younger generation. They march beneath the banner of a strange sort of mysticism which I should call Religion without God. The young poets and the young novelists are convinced that they believe, and, indeed, they believe that they believe. ' Look at us,' they say. ' You see we are believers.' In reality, they have not found their God. And their leaders are in like case. Yesterday it was Taine, Vogüé ; to-day, they say it is Barrès. All alike preach the necessity for a creed, but the idols are broken.

" Consider, a moment, how instructive, from this point of view, is the history of the century. The scepticism of the Encyclopædists brings in the neo-catholic wave, with

Chateaubriand, Lamennais and the Romantics. Then the watery idealism of the succeeding epoch gives rise to a scientific reaction and that feverish spirit of research which inspired Renan with such soaring hopes.

“ And now we see how a surfeit of science and positivism has driven man—man the inveterate dreamer of dreams, with his insatiable thirst for the ideal—along the road to a new mysticism marked by a contempt for mere facts and an indifference towards Reason and the Sciences. One feels that the Real has no authentic message for the younger generation.

“ Bergsonism will succeed, and so, as a general rule, will any philosophy calculated to throw discredit on the Intellect. It is manifest that we have had enough of the Intellect, and now for a long time past there has been a certain tendency politely to conduct the Intellect to the frontier of the Creator’s republic ; not, however, without a multitude of bouquets. As long ago as Mallarmé’s day, the Symbolists were vaticinating instead of

thinking. It seems as if that state of affairs were going to begin again.

“Then, speaking generally, the younger people, who have more heart than we, are devoid of brain and mistrust its operations. Their sole desire is that their religious and æsthetic beliefs should be as restful as possible—in other words, as stupid as possible.

“Christianity will gain by it, but not greatly. For there is no real fire about it at all. The bush burns not, and the peak of Sinai is shrouded in mist. To tell the truth, there is not a god that has not been cast down, not a god left standing for man to adore. All the world, in its eagerness to believe, falls on its knees before the altar which Saint Paul discovered on the Acropolis—the altar dedicated to the Unknown God. Will that altar cease to be tenantless? Will some new God come to dwell therein?

“That, Time alone will show.”

